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The Boy Hercules; or, The Prairie Tramps.

BY OLL COOMES,

AUTHOR OF "VAGABOND JOE," "THE DUMB SPY," "ANTELOPE ABE," "KEEN-KNIFE," "PROSPECT PETE," ETC., ETC.



HE PLANTED HIS FIST IN THE COLONEL'S FACE—KNOCKING HIM CLEAR OVER THE STOVE INTO THE CORNER OF THE ROOM. THE SAME INSTANT THE HOUNDS LEAPED AT THE THROATS OF THE SAVAGES.

The Boy Hercules;

OR,

THE PRAIRIE TRAMPS.

A DAKOTA ROMANCE.

BY OLL COOMES,
AUTHOR OF "VAGABOND JOE," "THE DUMB SPY," "ANTELOPE ABE," "KEEN-KNIFE," "PROSPECT PETE," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE MYSTERIOUS SLEDGE.

THE plains of Dakota lay covered with the snows of mid-winter.

The sky was overcast and the wind shifting into the north-west told of a coming storm.

A solitary footman pushing his way with weary footsteps across the great prairie noted this fact with alarm, for many long miles and a bitter, wintry night were between him and his destination.

Frank Morton was a young man of perhaps five-and-twenty. He was possessed of a robust physique, a handsome, intellectual face, a noble heart, a courageous spirit and a resolute and indomitable will.

He was warmly clad in a great-coat made of fur, deerskin leggings, and beaver cap and gloves.

That morning young Morton had left Baker's Settlement on the head-waters of the Maple river for The Corners, a settlement forty miles South on the Big Cheyenne. He had started out on horseback, and, although the journey was a long one for a winter day, and over a route where there was not a single station or house, he had confidence in the ability of his strong-limbed and spirited horse to make the trip in due season; and he doubtless would have succeeded had it not been for a serious accident—such as he had never dreamed of. When but half the distance had been made his horse stumbled into a ditch hidden by the snow, and was so badly crippled that a feeling of humanity prompted the man to relieve the poor animal of its misery by shooting it.

It was a serious loss, but Frank Morton did not sit down to grieve over it; he at once struck out afoot. He had an appointment at The Corners that he must fulfill—an appointment that no honorable man ever fails to keep. It was with one of the settlement's fairest daughters whom he was to wed on the morrow.

Although deprived of his horse, the young Indian Agent, for such Frank Morton was, felt no fears of his ability to make the trip on foot. He was satisfied, however, it would take him until late in the night, counting, of course, upon fair weather and no further accidents. But, another bitter disappointment was in store for him, for night finally closed around him with a blinding snow-storm sweeping furiously across the plain.

Nor was this the worst of it; he soon discovered that he was lost! In fact, it would have been almost impossible for any living man not perfectly familiar with that prairie to have kept his course with no landmarks whatever to guide him. Frank endeavored to set himself right by the course of the wind, not knowing that, since darkness had set in, the wind had veered around into the north-east. His mind, when he was all wrong, underwent that strange hallucination so peculiar to a bewildered person. He came to the conclusion that the wind was in the south-west when it was directly in an opposite course. He traveled north when he believed that he was going south, and it was a long time before he could satisfy himself that he was hopelessly bewildered. However, he determined to keep moving until the storm abated or daylight relieved him of his predicament. He kept in good spirits. He knew to give up was to perish.

The dismal howl of wolves came borne on the wild winds to his ears.

His clothes became heavy with the snow lodged among the fur.

For hours he wandered on and on. Finally he came to a thicket of short hazel brush. His heart gave a great bound, for he felt sure he was approaching the wooded bluffs of the Cheyenne. He moved carefully forward. The dark outlines of something appeared before him. It was not more than a rod away, yet his vision was so obscured by the blinding snow he could not make out what it was. He moved a step or two nearer and paused. He could now

see that the object assumed the outlines of a man—a Titan form with his arms extended above his head.

Frank Morton spoke. A snort like that of an animal fell upon his ears. He spoke again. The figure before him moved. He heard a crashing among the bushes and the grinding crunch of snow as if under hooved feet. Then the object swept past him like the wind and—was gone. But he caught the outlines of a huge elk harnessed to a sledge in which he saw a muffled figure sitting.

What did it mean? Who was the storm-waif? and what was he doing there? Was he, too, lost?

Frank Morton asked himself these questions; then he shouted aloud to the unknown—fired off his revolver.

Only the howl of the driving storm answered him.

The young Indian Agent was astounded. There was something very strange about what he had witnessed, and the more he pondered over the matter the more strange it seemed. Finally he dismissed it from his mind altogether and trudged on through the thicket and out into a broad prairie beyond. The bluffs of the Cheyenne were not there.

In the course of an hour the storm ceased as if by magic. The wind went down. The gray clouds parted, and the moon looked to earth.

Frank Morton stopped and gazed around him like one aroused from a slumber in the broad glare of day. The moon was at his back. He was traveling almost northward! He stopped—a feeling akin to despair rising in his breast. But, instantly, his mind reverted to the fair Florence Sheldon awaiting his coming; his courage rallied, and changing his course he hurried on through the snow with a quickened脚步. He had not gone far, however, when his ears were greeted by the quick, heavy tramp of feet in the snow.

Looking around him he was surprised to see that same elk-sledge coming down the prairie on his right.

Seeing it would cross his path but a few rods before him he threw up his arms and gave a loud shout. But the mysterious man in the sledge took no heed of him. Frank repeated the shout and again fired off his revolver; still the wanderer heeded him not and sped on past him with wonderful rapidity.

This time Frank was enabled to see all more distinctly. The elk was the largest he had ever seen. The sledge was perhaps six feet long and in some respects resembled those used by Arctic explorers with the exception that it had a box on it that was low in front and rather high behind. The driver sat leaning against the back of the box well bundled up in warm furs and robes, while before him, at his feet, appeared to be another person sitting on the bottom of the sledge covered over with a blanket. The line attached to the elk's antlers, by which the animal was guided, hung loose in the hand of the driver, who, sitting bolt upright, appeared to take no notice of things around him.

My God! is the man asleep? or is he dead? If not, why is he wandering so aimlessly about over the plain? why so motionless in his sledge? Had he perished in the storm? and if so was his companion also, dead?

While these questions were revolving through the confused mind of the young Indian Agent, the moon plunged under a cloud, the sky became overcast, the wind rose, and the snow began again to whirl and drive through the air. In a few minutes the storm had regained its original fury, through which Frank plodded wearily on, his thoughts not only busied with his own fate, but with the mystery surrounding that elk-sledge.

By this time the weather began growing colder which increased the danger of Morton's situation. His fingers began to tingle with the keen, biting frost. He whipped his hands smartly upon his sides as he hurried along.

Suddenly a long, dark object appeared before him. It required but a second glance to tell him that it was a long, low cabin. His heart gave a great bound of joy. He could scarcely suppress a shout as he bounded forward and, groping along the side of the building, found the door.

At this juncture the storm again ceased and the heavens grew lighter.

Frank rapped upon the door once—twice—thrice, but no one bade him enter.

Was the cabin tenantless?

Frank lifted his eyes and as if in answer to his question the moon burst through the clouds

revealing to his startled gaze these words—written in large letters over the door:

"THE GOOD SAMARITAN RANCH."

CHAPTER II.

THE GOOD SAMARITAN RANCH.

THIS was the name of a place over and around which hung a profound mystery. It was a long, low cabin whose thick walls were made of sod and whose roof was of the same material supported by a strong frame-work of cottonwood poles and slabs. It stood on the bank of a swift-flowing stream, that wound its way across the plains of Dakota and emptied into the Cheyenne river. Local superstition, when the place was first discovered, declared it was inhabited by the spirits of its murdered builders, and for this reason it was, at first, shunned by the settler, hunter or trapper who chanced to go that way.

But, finally, a party of hunters, emboldened by their number, ventured to stop over night at the ranch. They were surprised to find evidence of some one having recently been there, and the place was, for a frontier home, well furnished for housekeeping. There were tables, rude chairs, a cooking stove and utensils and a lot of dishes in one room. In another was a long table, upon which was scattered a lot of books, illustrated papers and pamphlets and a number of religious tracts. There were also a small looking-glass, a shelf upon which were a number of cheap pipes and several packages of tobacco, and a large blank book, on the back of which, in large letters, was a polite invitation for all accepting the hospitality of the place to "please register your names." In the third apartment were bunks of straw and blankets. Outside and over the main entrance—on a smooth pine board was the following:

"THE GOOD SAMARITAN RANCH.

"LET HIM WHO JOURNEYS ENTER AND PAR-TAKE OF FOOD AND REST WITHOUT MONEY AND WITHOUT PRICE."

After this discovery had been made, many hunters and trappers availed themselves of the invitation to call and remain over night, the well-fed guests of an unknown host. In the course of time the Indians and outlaws found out something of the place, and they, too, called there frequently when belated or hungry.

But, singular as it may seem, neither hunter, savage nor outlaw ever defiled a thing found in the ranch. True, they all helped themselves, as invited, but carried nothing away. The Indian's inborn love of theft was overcome through awesome fear of the invisible beings whom they believed presided over The Samaritan Ranch; while the outlaws, no difference what their opinions were as to the mystery of the place, had no inclination to impose upon the goose that was laying them a golden egg, even though their natural enemies were reaping an equal benefit.

The place was kept supplied in the same silent and mysterious way. A post-trader at Y—named Farquar, received orders accompanied with the money, for meat, flour, coffee, tobacco and other articles to be delivered at the ranch without any questions whatever being asked—with promise of other orders in lieu of secrecy. These orders, which bore no signature, were always made out in the same plain, legible hand, and left on the door-step of the agent's private residence. And as the trade of The Samaritan Ranch was a good one, the trader kept the matter a secret. It did not concern him who those mysterious customers were so long as he got their money, and through fear of losing their trade, he kept the whole matter a secret, and quietly delivered the goods ordered by team—claiming to those at the Agency that he was sending supplies to this or that isolated settlement.

Some parties finally undertook to ferret out the mystery of this lone ranch, but failed entirely. They could find nothing upon which to base any other conclusion than that the place was kept up by some Christian missionary society, like the Christian work of the monks of St. Bernard, with the exception of secrecy, which was probably observed that no distinction might be made between Christian, outlaw or savage; and so that all wayfarers—be they robbers, savages or hunters, stopping there might be brought to feel the influence of Christian kindness and forgiveness, and not only relieve them from suffering and hunger, but also reclaim them from the transgression of the laws of God and man. But at the same time the party making this decision, concluded also, that the society had undertaken a work that would, in all human probability, exhaust the wealth of a

Croesus before converting to Christianity a single red-skin or an average American-bred outlaw by appealing to the weakness of his stomach.

Whether these parties were right or wrong in any or all of their conclusions regarding The Samaritan Ranch, they were accepted as right by those living anywhere near, and they awaited results. Of course, the outside world had heard but little about the mysterious wilderness lodge and cared less—attributing the whole story to the vagaries of superstitious minds.

The Samaritan Ranch was twenty miles from the nearest settlement, so that those mostly interested in the place were men that led nomadic lives—such as hunters and trappers and scouts; and after these found out that Indians and outlaws also were welcome guests, they always approached the place with caution. In fact, a party of Indians or outlaws encamped at The Samaritan were as greatly feared as though in their village or stronghold in the foothills; and, upon the other hand, no Indian or outlaw ventured there without the assurance that he was not anticipated by an enemy. The result of this was that few stopped there unless absolutely compelled to, and those who did made haste to depart as soon as possible.

Thus, for two years at least, The Good Samaritan Ranch had been a free lodging house to all disposed to stop there; and in that time no two enemies had ever met there. The savages on the war-path might breakfast there—the dashing white scout might drink his coffee boiled on the hot coals of the Indians' campfire—the daring freebooter smoke a pipe of tobacco at the expense of the ranch, while the scout was still in view on the plain; yet all escape a collision. It seemed that no one desired to disturb the quietude of the place with the sound of a pistol fired in anger, or to make it a scene of bloodshed and death.

And it was this fact, more than all others, that sustained the mystery that hung over and around the tenantless and lonely Samaritan Ranch.

CHAPTER III.

BLOODHOUND DICK.

FRANK MORTON stood motionless with his brain in a dizzy whirl. He could scarcely believe the evidence of his own eyes. It seemed impossible that he could not only be standing in front of The Good Samaritan Ranch, but, at the same time, be all of twenty miles out of his course. But he determined to make the best of his situation. He always had opinions of his own regarding this Lone Lodge; nor were they exalted opinions; but with a fixed purpose he opened the door and entered the cabin.

It was pitchy dark in the room, though pervaded by a warm air which led to the belief that there had recently been a fire in it. Taking a match from his vest-pocket, Frank struck it and by the light took a view of his surroundings. The first thing that arrested his attention was a half-burned candle sitting on a table. He at once lit it and then began an exploration of the whole building. There was not a soul save himself about the place. He found it well-furnished—better, in fact, than the average frontier home.

There were three rooms in the building. In the first was a stove, cooking-utensils, tables, chairs and provisions. In the stove he found a few coals of fire which convinced him some one had been there during the past day if not since nightfall.

Removing his overcoat and cap and hanging them against the wall, Morton proceeded to kindle a fire. There was quite a pile of fuel in one corner. When the young agent had become warmed, he resolved to have something to eat. He found some bread on a shelf. Dried venison and buffalo and smoked ham hung in one corner. He made a cup of coffee, and in a short time found himself seated, a lonely guest at the table of the mysterious Samaritan Ranch.

He could still hear the storm raging without, and felt thankful that he had made such a providential escape.

After supper was over he entered the second, or middle room and examined the "register." Many names were upon it, two of which bore the date of that day; but they were unknown to Morton, as indeed were most of them.

Taking up one of the eagle-quill pens that lay upon the table, Frank dipped it into the ink and signed his name in a plain, bold hand. Then he selected a book from the Samaritan library—"The Life of George Washington"—and returning to the first room seated himself by the

warm stove and soon became absorbed in the adventures of the "Young Surveyor."

Thus he had passed an hour or more when he was startled by a slight sound outside at the door. Closing the book he rose, took up the candle and going to the door opened it. The light shot out into the gloom—the wind whirled into the room. The light was extinguished, but not before its beams had revealed a startling sight to Morton's eyes. It was that strange sledge—that same huge elk with its gigantic palmate horns—that same sledge that had passed him twice before that night in the storm. The light glared full upon the face of the occupant, and such a face! It was covered with a long beard, hoary with clinging icicles and snow-flakes. The eyes were wide open and fixed with a stony glare.

By heavens! the man was dead!

This was Frank Morton's conclusion the instant his eyes fell upon the face; but before he had time for a second thought, the light was blown out and the elk, which had doubtless wandered there and taken shelter from the storm behind the cabin, frightened at the flash of the light, sped away with its silent driver into the stormy darkness.

To Frank the man was a stranger, but that he had perished in the storm he had not a doubt, while the elk was wandering at will over the plain.

But were there not two persons in the sledge? was it not possible that a woman sat among the robes at the dead man's feet? and if so, was she living, or was she dead?

Frank closed the door, relit the candle and again seated himself by the stove. He had scarcely done so when he heard the sound of voices outside the cabin and the next moment the door was thrown open and three men, covered with snow, bolted into the room.

Morton rose to his feet as they entered.

"Hullo!" exclaimed one of the three, "we're not the only wayfarers at The Good Samaritan Ranch."

"No, sir," replied Frank, "I have been here at least two hours. Come up to the fire, strangers."

"A bad night," observed one of the men.

"I never experienced a worse one," replied Frank.

The three men removed their caps and overcoats and shaking the snow off, hung them up. Then they turned and walked up to the stove, the taller of the three fixing a searching look upon Frank's face and inquiring:

"How long did you say you had been here?"

"Two hours, I should judge," answered Frank; "but whom have I the honor of addressing?"

"Colonel Cyrus Gleason's my name; this gentleman is Joel Bain and that—Reverend Father Gaule," answered the tall man, and his answer was as unsatisfactory as it was authoritatively spoken.

"Colonel" Gleason was a tall, well-built man of perhaps thirty years. He was dressed in a citizen's suit of dark cloth that fit him neatly. He wore a full, black beard. His eyes were of a dark gray, keen and searching, and seemed to rest upon Frank with suspicion.

Joel Bain was a low, heavy-set man, with a stubby beard, a short neck, a round, bullet head, and an expressionless face.

"Reverend Father" Gaule, as he was called, was an over-fed Irishman with a smooth, fat face, red as a lobster—thick, sensual lips, and heavy, shaggy brows that overhung small gray eyes. He was dressed in black, something after the style of a priest.

Altogether they were an interesting trio, and they did not look upon Morton with any more distrust than he did upon every one of them.

"How far have you traveled to-day?" Frank inquired, in order to keep up the appearance of sociability.

"Twenty-five miles," said the "colonel," reflectively, as he combed the snow and ice from his beard with his white, delicate fingers; "and I am tired and hungry, too. Say, Bain, suppose you fly round here and get us up a supper—some pan-cakes, broiled ham, chipped venison, and some roaring hot coffee."

The man spoke as though he was at home, and Frank felt fully convinced that he was no stranger at the ranch.

Bain threw off his coat, and went to work as though he, too, was at home, and while he was preparing supper, Gleason lit another candle, and, accompanied by Gaule, went into the adjoining room.

The two stopped and looked at the "register."

"Good God!" burst aloud from Gleason's

lips; then lowering his voice to a whisper, continued: "that fellow in yonder is the young Indian Agent, Frank Morton!"

"If that is the signature of the fellow, it is he," replied Gaule.

"Who knows then but that his presence accounts for the non-appearance of Philgrave? Gaule, we must sound him. If he has got wind of our plans, he is here to thwart us if he has not done so already. Don't let on that we have seen the register—that we know him."

So saying the two men returned to the first apartment.

Bain having supper nearly ready Gleason and Gaule drew their stools up to the table and carried on a conversation on the weather and other incidental topics.

Finally their meal was ready and they ate long and heartily. Frank was invited to partake but he politely declined, having already eaten.

After they had concluded their meal, Father Gaule said, addressing Frank:

"Young man, I presume the storm forced you to accept shelter here to-night; or did you come as an invited guest to attend the wedding that was, or, I may say, is to take place here to-night?"

"A wedding?" exclaimed Frank, "a wedding at The Samaritan Ranch on such a night as this?"

"It is a terrible night," continued Gaule, "and a novel place for a wedding, but it is one of those romantic affairs we read about—a clandestine marriage. The colonel, here, is one of the high contracting parties—the lady has not yet arrived."

"Well, indeed," confessed Frank, "it is a most decidedly romantic affair, but this is certainly a dreadful night for a woman to come out. It is too bad for any one to venture out."

"Yes, yes," responded the man dressed as a priest, "but Philgrave, the lady's escort, knows every rod of this prairie like a book; and then he is rigged with a light sledge, to which he drives an animal that can make better time through storm and snow than any horse on the sod. He drives an elk."

"An elk?" cried young Morton, starting to his feet.

"Yes, an elk; have you seen such an outfit?"

"My God, yes! three times to-night have I seen an elk sledge with the occupant—the driver sitting bolt upright—dead!"

"Dead?" cried Colonel Gleason, starting with surprise, "do you mean to tell me Walt Philgrave is dead?"

"I do not know the man I saw," replied Morton; "I only know that a man with a long beard was in a sledge drawn by an elk, which seemed to take affright whenever I was near it. I only had a glimpse of the man's face—once at that very door when the light streamed out upon it. The elk, it seemed, had sought shelter behind the cabin, but when I opened the door it dashed away."

"Was the man alone?" asked Gaule.

"It looked to me as though there was some person sitting at his feet, covered over with blankets," answered Frank.

"By heavens!" cried the colonel, more in disappointment than in sorrow, "then Philgrave and the girl have both perished; and yet it seems impossible that a man of Philgrave's constitution and power of endurance—who was so warmly clad and well furnished with robes and wraps, should perish on such a night as this, while others should reach here in safety. Gentlemen, there is something wrong about this."

The tone in which the last words were spoken, and the look that accompanied it, startled Frank Morton; but maintaining his composure, he asked:

"From whence was your friend to bring your affianced?"

"From The Corners Settlement," replied the colonel, looking straight at the young Indian Agent.

"Indeed?" observed Frank: "I am somewhat acquainted at The Corners—in fact, am on my road there now. Very likely I know her."

"Perhaps you do—it is Miss Florence Sheldon," explained Gleason.

Frank started as though a dagger had been thrust into his heart; and no wonder, for *Florence Sheldon was the girl to whom he was to be wedded on the morrow!*

It was full a minute before he could think or speak. Was the colonel trifling with him? Did he know that Florence was his betrothed? Having revolved these questions in his mind, he asked Gleason if he were not jesting.

"No, sir, I mean what I say," was the colonel's decided answer.

"Do you mean to tell me, Colonel Gleason, that Florence Sheldon, of her own free will, was to meet you here to-night and become your willing bride?"

"I do," replied the colonel emphatically.

"Then, sir, you lie!" fiercely retorted the young Indian Agent, while his dark eyes flashed with a terrible light, and his face became livid with the passions surging in his breast.

There was a momentary silence. Gleason and his men seemed to shrink in fear under the blaze of the young agent's eyes. But they soon recovered; then Gleason, fired with passion, thundered:

"Scoundrel! take back that insult or you shall die!"

"Never!" came coolly, calmly from Morton's lips.

The two drew their revolvers.

A deadly silence fell upon the party.

The two foes seemed to hesitate as they glared into each other's eyes. Then the click of their revolvers was heard as they drew back the hammers.

The storm at this juncture seemed to beat furiously against the cabin. The door burst open. The light was blown out. Darkness filled the room. There was a rush and shuffle of feet—a sniffing as if of animals.

"Close the door! don't let him escape!" yelled Gleason.

Gaule sprung to the door and closed it. As he did so something hairy brushed in past him.

Bain relit the candle. As its light dispelled the darkness of the room, Gleason and his confederates started back—their faces blanched with terror. Before them stood the giant, snow-shrouded form of a man with a pair of huge revolvers in his hands, while at his side—with green, glaring eyes and red dripping mouths stood half a dozen ferocious bloodhounds.

"Bloodhound Dick!" burst from young Morton's lips, and the very name sent a shiver to the heart of Cyrus Gleason and his companions.

CHAPTER IV.

A SPIRIT FORM AND FACE.

THE name, Bloodhound Dick, was no misnomer, as many an outlaw and savage had learned to his sorrow, and it had been said that he was no respecter of persons—that he was a cold-blooded man-hunter—a very demon who reveled in the blood of his mangled victims. But this was untrue. The superstition of the prairies has a faculty of magnifying mole-hills into mountains. The Indians had given Dick Wharton the name of Bloodhound from the fact that he was always followed by a pack of fox, deer and bloodhounds, and woe to the hostile red-skin or outlaw that dared to cross his path.

Dick Wharton was a young man—in fact a boy of twenty, but he stood over six feet in his moccasins. He was straight as an Indian with the muscular developments of an athlete—broad shouldered, active as a panther and strong as a lion. His face was smooth and boyish looking, though his features were clear cut and strong in their expression. His nose was slightly aquiline; his eyes were of a dark gray; his mouth rather large but expressive of firmness and resolution.

This Boy Hercules, as he was also called, was a hunter, trapper, scout, or anything that gave him an active, adventuresome life. He was a prairie nomad with no fixed location—coming and going with his horde of hounds—first here, then there—shunning civilization almost wholly. But now and then he met a fellow hunter, or a band of soldiers, or perchance a scout or settler, and not one of them ever parted with him having any other than the very highest regard for his manhood and honor. He was full of life—always happy, a rollicking, genial fellow—exceptionally intelligent for one of his age and calling. His love for his dogs was truly remarkable—a freak of nature—and his sole ambition seemed to be, so many declared, in securing them plenty to eat whether he went hungry or not himself.

This was the man that now confronted Colonel Gleason and his confederates, and as he stood before them with his great buffalo overcoat reaching to his knees, and a monster cap made of some long fur upon his head, he looked like an overgrown giant—a demon wafted there from the Boreal regions by the fierce storm.

The colonel started back with a look of inward fear upon his handsome face when he discovered the young giant glaring down into his

eyes with a monster navy revolver in each hand thrust under his very nose.

"Old hoss," the Boy Hercules exclaimed in a deep voice, "I'm here to see fair play. I seen through that little winder that you wer'n't inclined to give my friend Morton a square deal, and so I take his hand and don't forget it, mister. I hold a full hand—five aces."

"Frank Morton insulted me," declared the colonel, "and no man can do so with impunity. He shall retract it, or I'll have satisfaction."

"Don't you offer to raise a rumpus while me and my pups are here. There'll be no blood shed in The Good Samaritan to-night if I can help it. This is the place where friends and foes can meet and lap out of the same dish, smoke out of the same pipe—eat, drink and be merry. Jist put away that little barker to once, and remember your treadin' on sanctified ground."

"Dick," said the colonel, putting up his revolver, "you and I need have no trouble, for I know you do not understand the situation, or you would not take the stand you do."

Frank Morton breathed easier when he found that he had a friend in Bloodhound Dick. He had never met the Boy Hercules but once before, and did not think that the young prairie rover would ever recognize him should they meet again. But he did, and took a stand as between him and Gleason that quickly cooled the haughty colonel down.

Fearful thoughts, however, were burning in the brain of Frank Morton. Was it true, that his affianced Florence Sheldon, was false to him?—that she was to have met the colonel there and been clandestinely wedded to him?

The colonel was just such a man he knew, as could fascinate by his fine face and form, his suave manners and voice, and the wonderful magnetism of his eyes, the heart of an unsuspecting girl. Yet, he would not—he could not believe that his own fair Florence had been alienated from him by this captivating man whose real character was unknown. But he was fully convinced now that Florence had been the victim, or was about to be, of some foul villainy. From the few remarks he had heard from Gleason and his men he became fully satisfied that she was to have been spirited away from home and brought the Lone Ranch and there forced into marriage with Gleason. In fact, the fellows admitted this was the case, themselves. It was plain enough, too, that the man Gaule was there in the guise of a Romish priest to perform the unnatural ceremony.

Now the question arose in his mind as to whether the man Philgrave sent to conduct Florence to the ranch had been successful in spiriting her away. If so, was Philgrave that lifeless form he had seen sitting in the sledge that night? and was the maiden there in that pile of robes at his feet? If so, was she dead, too? or had she become stupid with cold and terror, and sat there totally unconscious of her situation?

Frank Morton could not settle anything definite in his mind, for the thoughts of his sweetheart being the unwilling companion of a dead man, and being carried aimlessly here and there through that awful night and storm, sent an icy chill to his very heart. Some one, he was satisfied was in the sledge with Philgrave, and if it was Florence he never expected to see her alive again. And terrible and revengeful, indeed, were his emotions when he realized that before him stood the self-confessed author of all. It was all he could do to keep from shooting the villain down. Had he been positive of one thing—of the maiden being in the sledge—no earthly power would have prevented him from putting a bullet through Gleason's heart. But he thought it barely possible that the man Philgrave might have failed in abducting her, but met his death in the attempt.

To quiet his emotions, Frank finally turned and went into the middle room where Gleason had left a candle burning, and sat down, leaving Bloodhound Dick discussing the situation with the three men in no very amiable mood.

The young Indian Agent brooded over his troubles for several moments. Finally he fell into that mental stupor which usually follows the keenest anguish of heart. But from this he was finally aroused by a faint noise on his right in the third room or sleeping apartment of The Samaritan.

Raising his eyes he glanced toward the door of the room. A cry of mingled joy and surprise escaped his lips. His eyes fell upon the face of a young girl with soft brown eyes, a wealth of flowing dark brown hair, and features extremely beautiful. It was the face of his betrothed, Florence Sheldon! But it seemed

a spiritual face floating along in the misty shadows where the light and darkness met in the adjoining room.

Morton, to assure himself that he was not dreaming—that it was not the vision of his distressed mind—passed his hand over his aching brow and looked again. There was no mistake. Before him was the face of his sweetheart, looking silently out upon him—pale and wan and almost ethereal.

Frank rose to approach the girl, but before he had taken a step, Bloodhound Dick glided softly into the room, his eyes distended with wonder.

"Morton, do you see that face?" he exclaimed pointing toward the door of the bedroom.

"Yes! I do—I did—'tis gone!" cried Frank clutching the arm of the Boy Hercules; "it was her spirit—the spirit of Florence Sheldon! Oh, my God, Dick! this is more than I can stand and know, too, that her murderers are here—under this roof!"

"I don't understand you, Frank," said Dick completely astounded; "what do you mean?"

"Sit down, Dick, and I'll tell you."

The two sat down. In a whisper Morton told of his intended marriage on the morrow with Florence Sheldon—of his journey across the prairie, the death of his horse, his getting lost in the night storm; and of the mysterious elk-sledge, its dead driver and the silent form at his feet; and of his running across The Samaritan, the coming of the three men and the revelation of the man Gaule as to the clandestine wedding to have been there that night.

Bloodhound Dick's face grew livid and his eyes blazed as Frank narrated his story.

"By the eternal heavens!" he exclaimed, bringing his great fist down upon the table with such force as to crack one of the boards in it, "them scoundrels shall account for her death, if dead she be; but first, let us look into that room, Morton; I don't b'lieve in spirits."

They took the candle and entered the room. They searched it thoroughly, but not a thing, but a few bunks, was there in the apartment, nor were there any traces of any one having been there. Had Frank alone seen the face of his sweetheart he would have believed it the vision of a distracted brain, but other eyes than his had seen it, and although he was not superstitious, he firmly believed it was the spirit of his murdered darling.

They turned and went back into the middle room. Just then a yell and a shout came from the first or main apartment. Bloodhound Dick peered in to see what it meant. To his surprise he discovered that five more persons had called at the ranch, and, what was the most startling, he saw they were Indian warriors—deadly enemies of Bloodhound Dick's—who were received by Gleason and his men with a hearty welcome.

"My Lord, Morton!" the young giant exclaimed, "they hold the full hand now—are three to our one. If we remain here, we are going to have a lively time of it. Them savages would tear me to shreds if they could, and they'll try it the minute they find out I'm here. Frank, we've got to fight, but don't forget that each one of them dogs is good for a red-skin. Here, Raven," he called, in a low tone, to his dogs; "here, Rascal—here, Rove—here, Vulcan—here, Jupiter—here, Pluto."

As each of his dogs answered to his name, the young giant took the animal by the throat and shook him till he whined. But the animals knew what it meant, and in an instant they were aquiver with ferocious excitement.

Meanwhile the Indians and the white men were keeping up a babel of talk and rejoicings in the first room. Gleason did not tell the redskins of the presence of Bloodhound Dick and young Morton in the other room until they had divested themselves of their blankets, brushed the snow from their hair and were ready for offensive work. But Dick was not to be caught, and the moment there was a lull in the kitchen, he whispered to Frank:

"Now, Morton, let us beard the lions in their den, for I see The Good Samaritan is not big enough to hold us all till morning. And somebody's got to go under. Them savages have doubtless been follerin' me all day. They know that I've only a few dogs with me, and they mean to have my skulp if they can git it. But, by the eternal stars! they'll have a lively time before they get it. Draw your revolver, Frank, and let's get the drop on them, for it'll be that much in our favor to begin with."

As he concluded the young giant stepped into the room and confronted the foe.

An exclamation of surprise burst from the lips of the savages as they grasped their tomahawks.

A devilish smile lit up the face of Gleason and his two men.

The hounds uttered a fierce snarl as half-crouching for a spring they showed their teeth.

A deadly silence ensued. It was the calm before the burst of the storm.

CHAPTER V. THE CONFLICT.

FOR several moments the Indians and their three white friends stood glaring at Dick Wharton and Frank Morton with apparent surprise at the audacity of the two in daring to confront such overwhelming odds. But at that very time they overlooked the fact that six ferocious bloodhounds stood ready to leap at their throats. A growl from one of the dogs, however, reminded the foe of their presence, and told the Indians wherein rested the fearless courage of the Boy Hercules.

Gleason and his men did not realize as fully as the Indians did, the danger to be expected from the dogs, and the colonel being anxious to precipitate the conflict, which he thought could not result otherwise than in his favor, attempted to draw his revolver; but Bloodhound Dick was on the alert, and quick as a flash of lightning he planted his fist in the colonel's face—knocking him clear over the stove into the corner of the room.

The same instant the great hounds leaped at the throats of the savages—striking them with such terrible force that they were borne to the floor. In their fall the table was overturned, the candle was upset and the light put out. Darkness filled the room. But the conflict did not cease. The dogs and the savages were engaged in a horrible struggle. Not a pistol was fired. In the gloom there was danger of shooting a friend, for the combatants were rapidly changing positions. Bloodhound Dick caught Frank by the arm and pulled him back into the middle room, saying:

"Let the dogs do the work. Judas! It started off superb! That light gettin' upset threw the scoundrels all out of sorts. But, didn't I give that colonel a bu'ster, tho'? Heavens! but the pups are tearin' things! Ay, the door's been opened."

True enough, the door leading outside was opened and four or five figures rushed out into the night. The Boy Hercules gave utterance to a shout of triumph.

The roar of the storm was now added to the sound of the conflict between the savages and the dogs; and the half-strangled cries of the savages' gurgling death-rattles, the thump and thud of limbs and bodies, the fierce snarling of the dogs and the crunching of their teeth, with now and then a death-moan—all conspired to make one of the most horrible and sickening sounds that ever greeted the ear of man.

"I must stop it," said Dick, "I can't stand it any longer."

He entered the room and closed the door. Frank followed with the light, when a different sight from that last looked upon was presented to the eyes of Morton and the young giant. The handsome colonel and his friends had vanished—escaped into the night, as had also two of the savages. Amid the ruins of kitchen furniture lay three dead savages and two dead hounds—the former with throats fearfully mangled—the latter with scalping-knives driven through their bodies.

The victory for the two young men had been complete, although Dick seriously mourned the loss of his two dogs. The other four escaped, fortunately with but a few scratches, and after all it was a cheap victory in a conflict where the odds had been against them.

"Frank," said Dick, as he looked upon his dead dogs, "I'm sorry now I didn't shoot that man Gleason, when I knocked him down. Them three miserable savages' lives don't begin to pay for the loss of them dogs. Poor old Rascal and Pluto—but maybe the storm will complete the work we began and furnish the wolves some food. They won't dare come back here again this night for fear of getting their epiglottises chawed."

"I see now, Dick," admitted Frank, "why it is you are such a scourge and terror to the redskins."

"I make it warm for them, Frank, sure as you're born. One o' the dearest friends I had on earth—my poor father—was massacred by savages, and I made up my mind I'd avenge his death. I raise a dozen bloodhounds every year with which to hunt Ingins. The red devils kill off a good many of them, but I tell you one good, well-trained hound's worth more'n a man in a hand-to-hand fight. But, look here, Morton, why need we stay here,

when, as you verily believe, Miss Sheldon is out in this storm, either dead or in danger. We may be able, with the aid of the hounds, to find that sledge. It is nearly morning now, and even if we should get lost, daylight will soon let us out. We might, also, come across that 'wedding party,' that left here so abruptly, and punish them a little more; but then, I presume, they'll take a near cut for the hills, where, in my opinion, they all belong."

"I am willing and ready for anything, Dick—anything but remaining here and know that Florence is abroad in this stormy night, suffering untold tortures if not already beyond suffering."

Thus their course of action was settled. The dead dogs and savages were removed from the room, and every trace of the conflict—as near as possible—was removed, and the furniture replaced in its former position.

Then donning their overcoats, caps and gloves, and putting out the light, they bid adieu to The Samaritan Ranch and plunged out into the storm.

But they had scarcely been gone ten minutes when there was a movement of something in the middle room of the cabin, followed by a scratch on the table. Then a little blue light pierced the gloom—growing larger and brighter each moment. It was a burning match held in a small, shapely hand—the hand of a woman, beyond a doubt. The tiny blaze grew larger—its light pierced the gloom revealing a dark-robed and veiled figure, who advancing, applied the match to the candle on the table.

Then the mysterious figure glanced around the room.

There was something strange about the coming of this dark-robed form. From whence did it come? Was it the unknown spirit that presided over The Good Samaritan Ranch?

Time will tell.

CHAPTER VI.

FLORENCE SHELDON'S ABDUCTION.

"The Corners" was a little settlement on the Cheyenne river and numbered some forty-odd souls, all told. One-half of this number were men—the other half women and children. Amos Sheldon was the first man to settle there after the enactment by Congress of the Homestead Law. He was soon followed by three other men with their families. Mr. Sheldon had erected his cabin in the corner of a quarter-section, and the other three men taking the other three quarters in the same section of land, built their cabins in the corners of the same so that all four were within half a stone's throw of each other, and from this fact the settlement was given the name "The Corners."

The settlement was located in a small grove of timber, and was many miles from any other settlement or station. The fact of its being in the center of a region abounding with game, made it all the more desirable for the settler who, for the first year or two, must depend on his rifle for his food; but at the same time it was a more dangerous location for the reason that it encroached upon the favorite hunting grounds of the Indians. But in the course of a year or so The Corners became a nucleus around which other adventuresome spirits began to crystallize, and Amos Sheldon believing that he could see in the place a future western metropolis, laid out a town and began to encourage immigration. A grocery store and trading-post combined, were soon started. Other families began to drop in, and it seemed that Mr. Sheldon was to realize his dreams sooner than expected. A mail-carrier, employed by the settlers themselves, carried the mail to and from The Corners, to and from the nearest regularly established office, so that they were not cut off from communication with the outside world.

There was one great drawback, however, to the more rapid settlement of the place, and that was the dangers to which it would be exposed in the event of an Indian outbreak—being a long ways from a military post.

However, The Corners was in the third year of its first settlement at the time of which I write, and aside from a few scares, the loss of a few horses and cattle, and the mysterious disappearance of two or three men, every thing had gone along as well as the most sanguine could have expected.

In these three years there had been some half a dozen births, one or two deaths, and at last it was announced that there was to be a wedding. Florence Sheldon, the fair daughter of the founder of the settlement, was to be wedded to Frank Morton, a young Indian Agent who resided at the Government Agency north of them. An informal invitation was out for all

The Corners to the wedding, and so one and all were expecting such a joyous time as the place had never witnessed.

On the day previous to that fixed for the nuptials pretty Florence Sheldon emerged from her father's house and walked briskly down toward the river. She was warmly clad, and her bright eyes sparkled and her fair face glowed with health and youthful joy. Upon her arm she carried a pair of skates, which, upon reaching the river, she fastened upon her feet, then with the ease and grace of a fawn she glided out upon the icy surface of the voiceless river and then turned and swept away down the stream.

Something like a mile had she thus traveled when she came to a halt and turned and went ashore. Removing her skates she ascended the bank and approached a double log cabin standing on the hillside, and known as "The Hermitage." At the door she was met by a young woman with a face of wondrous beauty. It was her friend Marion Renfrew who greeted her with a happy kiss and ushered her into the cabin, where before a cheery fire, the girls sat down and entered into conversation.

Marion Renfrew was the motherless child of Herbert Renfrew. She was eighteen years of age and possessed of a lithe yet well-developed form, dark eyes full of wondrous, sparkling light, and a face radiant in its girlish beauty and intelligence.

After the two had chatted a few minutes on various topics, Miss Renfrew said:

"Florence, you must be so very, very happy to-day, and to-morrow you must still be happier. Once I experienced something of the happiness of heart that you do to-day; but it was turned to cruel disappointment."

"Then, indeed, you have loved too, Marion," replied Florence.

"Yes, Florence, but I really didn't mean to reveal to you the skeleton in my closet, but since you and I are the dearest of friends, I must tell you something of my love affairs. I know the good people of The Corners think father and I rather mysterious folks; but then I like to be mysterious, Florence. We formerly resided in St. Joseph. There my dear mother died years ago. Father was very wealthy and I being an only child had everything pretty much my own way. One day I met by chance, at the residence of a friend and distant relative, a young man named Thomas Paige whom I admired from the moment we met, and my admiration—ay, my love, was but the responsive thrill of his own heart—we loved each other. But Thomas Paige was a poor boy—a prairie freighter as they called them. He drove a mule-team for a merchant trader over the plains. This in father's eyes was a barrier between us that could never be removed; and although he had never seen Tom—despite the fact that he was a noble, manly and honest boy, father denounced him as an ignorant mule-driver and prairie vagabond, and declared he would disown and disinherit me if I persisted in seeing Tom. Feeling certain that father would change his mind if he should meet him, I asked, begged and prayed that he let me invite Tom to our house that he might see what a noble fellow he was, but he turned a deaf ear to my entreaties. I was but sixteen then, and perhaps foolish but it almost killed me to have to give my lover up."

"At that time I was taking lessons in music, and drawing. I had a love for such work, especially the latter. An eminent artist told father, after examining some of my work, that I was possessed of a wonderful artistic talent, and as an inducement to break off with Tom, father offered to take me to Italy and place me under the tutelage of one of the world's greatest artists; but while I consented to give up my lover, I did not care to go to Rome."

"In the meantime father's health was failing, and our physician told him he must quit business for four or five years and go into the country and live, or else out upon the prairie where he could obtain wild game, free exercise in hunting it and pure, fresh air the year round. This pleased me very much, for I always loved the rolling prairies, the winding rivers and their wild picturesque scenery and grotesque mysteries. I am great on mysteries, Florence; but I presume it is because I am a mystery myself. Now The Good Samaritan Ranch is a mystery I like—have you ever seen my sketch of it, Florence?"

"No; but what a girl you must be. The very mention of The Samaritan makes me shiver."

Marion broke into a peal of rippling laughter. "I always knew I wasn't like other girls," she said, taking a large sketch-book.

table, "but here, Florence, is my drawing of The Good Samaritan."

Florence had never seen the ranch, yet from the description of it she had so often heard, it was a fine picture of the place—even to the very air of mystery that hung around the lonely cabin.

"But as I was saying," Marion went on, taking up the thread of her story where she had left off, "when father concluded to take the doctor's advice and locate on the prairie for a few years, he chose this remote and isolated spot for our home as much on my account as his own. Here he knew I would not be likely to meet Thomas Paige, and, in the full indulgence of my artistic talent and my love for everything wild, immense, odd, beautiful and romantic, I would even forget him. Well, we have now been here with our black servants nearly two years, and while I have not forgotten Tom, I must confess that I was never happier in my life. But look here, Flo., is another of my pictures; do you recognize that young man?"

She handed Florence the picture of a man with a smooth face, and tall, athletic form.

"Why, that's Dick Wharton!" exclaimed Florence the moment her eyes fell upon the picture; "and how very natural it is. Marion, you are a genius with the pencil and the brush; but isn't it too awful bad that they call Dick Wharton Bloodhound Dick?"

"Oh, I don't know," replied Marion with a laugh, "it is appropriate, I am sure; but, be that as it may, don't you think he is a handsome young giant? Such eyes, and such a noble face and fine, splendid physique. I always did like such men—I like everything, in fact, that is noble and manly in man. Your beau, Florence, is one of my ideal men, and I know he will make you a kind, noble and gallant husband. But, dear, dear! to-morrow you'll be married, and then what will I do for a friend—a dear, confidential friend, like you have been to me?"

"Why, Marion, I expect to be your friend just as I always have been. Why should I desert you?"

"Oh, but you'll have a husband to look after then," Marion replied with a witching laugh.

And thus the two maidens conversed an hour or so. In the mean time, however, Marion showed her friend a number of fine paintings and sketches of the surrounding scenery—of the prairie, the woods, and the river, and of animals—of the graceful deer and antelope, the shaggy bison, the stately elk and the skulking coyote; and of men—of hunters whom she had met, of Indians, and even of one whom she declared was the notorious outlaw-chief, Doc Middleton. But, the pictures that Marion considered her cleverest efforts were those of Bloodhound Dick and The Good Samaritan Ranch.

Before Florence was aware of it a couple of hours had slipped away and so she rose, put on her hood and gloves, saying:

"Then I will see you to-morrow, Marion—sure?"

"Yes, indeed," replied Marion; "and I do hope it will be a nice day. Father is so 'fraid it is going to storm."

"Oh, I hope not. Frank was to start from the Agency to day and it would be dreadful if he should get caught in a storm; but good-by, Marion."

"Good-by, Flo."

Florence descended the hill to the river where she again buckled on her skates, and, waving her hand to Marion watching her from the door of The Hermitage, she glided away up the river. She did not move very fast for her thoughts were busy with the joys of her young heart. Her cheeks glowed and her eyes sparkled.

As she suddenly rounded a bend in the stream, she saw a man standing on the ice before her. She saw that he was a tall man in a buffalo overcoat and cap. His face was partially concealed in a woolen scarf. On his arm hung a blanket.

At first the maiden did not think much about the man for she supposed it was one of the settlers, but as she approached nearer, she saw him move out as if to intercept her, and then she saw he was an entire stranger.

Florence's heart almost ceased to beat. A sudden fear seemed to paralyze her limbs and she stopped so suddenly that she almost fell. The man came up to her and said:

"Miss Sheldon, I believe?"

"Yes, sir," she replied in a tone that betrayed her fear, "but, sir, I do not recognize you."

"My name is Philgrave, and I have been long to see you."

"Me?" cried Florence.

"I answered, taking the blanket

from his arm and like a tiger leaping toward her.

Florence uttered a scream and attempted to elude him, but the villain was too quick for her, and throwing the shawl over her head and shoulders, lifted her in his strong arms as though she had been a child and carried her across the ice to the north shore and away into the woods to where a large elk harnessed to a sledge stood concealed among a clump of trees and bushes.

In this sledge the man deposited his half unconscious burden and carefully wrapped her up in blankets and furs. Then he unloosed the elk, mounted the seat behind the maiden, bundled himself up, took up the lines and spoke to the well-trained elk and was gone like a flash.

Poor Florence made one more desperate effort for liberty when she realized more fully the terrible fact that she was being carried away a captive; but she was helpless in the villain's power, and with a cry of despair sunk unconscious in the sledge.

CHAPTER VII.

THE YOUNG PRAIRIE TRAMP.

WHEN Florence Sheldon recovered consciousness it was like awakening from a long feverish, troubled sleep. But she quickly realized her situation—that she was being rapidly carried away. The quick and regular tramp, tramp of feet in the crusted snow, and the creaking of the sledge runner told her that she was still the captive of that big stranger.

Removing the blanket from her head she looked out and around her. They were in the open prairie—how far from home she knew not. It was almost night—evidence of the fact that she had lain in a swoon for hours, and that in the mean time she had been carried many long miles from home.

Florence grew sick at heart. She felt satisfied that the man was an outlaw and that he was carrying her away into the mountain fastnesses. Of course, she would be missed from home, she knew, and a search along the river between The Hermitage and home would reveal the tracks of her abductor. But could friends follow the sledge through the night?

Already the sky was overcast with clouds that foretold the early coming of a storm, and then all hopes would be in vain, for the snow would fill the sledge-tracks—no doubt the very thing her abductor desired—the very thing he had calculated upon to elude pursuit. However, the maiden endeavored to keep up her courage, and live in hopes that assistance would come to her before carried entirely beyond bounds that would preclude all possible hopes of escape.

The elk drawing the sledge was moving at a sweeping trot. The lines hung loose. The driver was silent. Florence's back was toward him, and she wondered why he was so still—never moving nor ever speaking either to her or the elk. She finally ventured to glance back over her shoulder at his face. A wild cry of horror burst from her lips. A shudder passed through her form. And no wonder. The man's eyes wore a vacant, glassy look. His head lay slightly to one side. There was a round hole in his forehead from which blood had oozed, and, running down his face, had formed in an icicle on his beard.

The man was stone dead!—yet, sitting there bolt upright!

Florence took in the situation at a glance, terrible as it was. While she lay in a swoon, the man had been shot through the brain. But by whom? By himself, or a friend of hers?

The girl glanced quickly around her. Many a person might have considered the present state of affairs as a change for the better; but not so with Florence. The wide, boundless plain, the deepening shadow of a dreadful night, and the horrible reality of being alone with a dead man, were more than her mind could bear, and again she sunk unconscious in the sledge.

Swiftly the elk swept on.

Night fell, dark, stormy and wild.

The snow began to fall, the wind to roar, and the wolves to howl in the distance.

But the friends of the maiden were not ignorant of her abduction.

Two boys, rabbit-hunting in the woods between The Hermitage and the settlement, saw the stranger carry her away, and trembling with terror the little fellows ran home and gave the alarm.

In ten minutes Amos Sheldon and three friends were armed and equipped for the pursuit. They hurried down to The Hermitage and there learned from Marion that Florence had left there more than an hour before.

Sheldon narrated the story of the boy hunters.

Without a word Herbert Renfrew took down his rifle, buckled a pair of revolvers to his waist, strapped a blanket on his shoulders and filled his pockets with provisions, and was ready to join Sheldon in search of his child.

"Father, are you going with Mr. Sheldon?" Marion asked, seeing him making these silent preparations.

"Yes, my child," he replied; "and let me caution you to be careful; other dangers may be near."

The party left The Hermitage and proceeding up the river searched the northern shore for the tracks of Florence's abductor. They had no difficulty in finding them at the very point given by the rabbit-hunters. They followed the tracks to where the sledge had been concealed. No doubt of the maiden's abduction was in a single mind now, and the party pushed on after the sledge.

In an hour they were out of the timber and up on the high table-land that rolled away in gentle undulations toward The Good Samaritan Ranch and the Black Hills. But, nowhere upon that mighty, snow-clad expanse could a living object be seen!

With a desperate determination those resolute men pushed on. They knew a long and wearisome journey was before them—one for which they were poorly prepared, but under the circumstances they felt that they could endure 'most any hardship.

It was many leagues before them to the nearest timber. They could not hope to reach it before darkness set in, and yet the thought of spending a night in mid-winter on the plains of Dakota was not altogether a pleasant one. However, they pressed bravely on. Some ten miles or more had been traversed when they discovered the track of a man who had come across from the west and turned abruptly and followed in the track of the sledge.

"By gracious!" exclaimed Herbert Renfrew, "some other fellow is in ahead of us in the pursuit."

"He may be a friend of the villain that abducted Florence," said Mr. Sheldon.

"I don't think so, friend Amos; a confederate of that villain would hardly be out here afoot. I'm of the opinion that some hunter has been tramping across the plain, and seeing the girl in the scoundrel's power, or else finding the track and mistrusting something wrong, has undertaken to follow it up. Of course, it can't be Bloodhound Dick or there would be dog-tracks around, for he was never known to be out without a pack of hounds."

"Would to God that it was the Boy Hercules," Mr. Sheldon exclaimed.

"Yes, if we could only strike that gallant young vagabond," said Renfrew, "we could, with the aid of his trained dogs, follow this track through the blackest night—providing it didn't storm, which I am really afraid it is going to do."

"Oh, heavens! I hope not, Renfrew; if it does and this track is covered my child will be forever lost!"

"Well, let us hope for the best, and be prepared for the worst."

Hour after hour they plodded on. They found as they advanced that the sledge-track did not—after the footman set in behind it—run in such a straight line as it had been before, but wandered here and there in a zig-zag course. They could not understand it. They knew it meant something.

The hours wore away and night draw on apace.

As Renfrew had predicted a storm was brewing. It must soon burst upon them. They were in the open prairie and they could follow the trail but little longer.

Suddenly it was discovered that the lone footman turned off from the sledge-track and went west. The party came to a halt and looked in the direction the unknown had gone. A deep valley, through which wound a little creek, lay before them. The stream was reached by a succession of benches, and the party became convinced that the man had gone down into the valley to seek shelter from the coming storm.

"Boys," said Phil Acklin, "I think we'd better hunt a shelter down there, too. If we can git in under the bank o' the creek it will be better'n out here in the prairie."

"All right, friends," assented Mr. Sheldon; "we have gone as far as we can. Let us follow this track down and find the fellow if possible, and ascertain whether he is a friend or foe, and what he knows about the sledge he has been following."

Taking the track they followed the unknown down the hillside to the high bank of a little stream that was frozen solid and the deep channel half filled with snow. The tracks led up the creek through a patch of brush. Our friends followed it up. A high and almost perpendicular bank rose on their right perhaps six feet from the edge of the channel. In this bank was a hole half hidden by a snow-drift, and into this hole the man they were following had crawled.

They had run the fox to his hole, but who was he?—a friend or foe?

Ignorance of these facts caused them to hesitate about attempting to follow him up. But while they were talking the matter over and trying to settle on some course of action, they were startled by a voice demanding:

"Hullo, there! who be you fellers?"

They turned and saw a round, rosy face under a big coon-skin cap pop up out of the hole like the head of an inquisitive old squirrel. All recognized the face at a glance.

"By heavens! it is Roving Ben, the Boy Hunter!" exclaimed Phil Acklin.

"So it is," shouted the boy; "I see you are all Corners folks, so crawl in here and make yourselves at home, for it's goin' to be a rippin' ole night. Come right in—the place's big enough for a score of the right sort o' cattle."

The party entered the retreat wherein the boy had already kindled a fire with dead sticks and brush. The place was nothing more than a "dugout" in the high bank. It was rather commodious and warm. When it had been dug and by whom, even Roving Ben did not know. He had found it one day some two years previous, and found it deserted. Since then, whenever he happened that way, he made it his lodging-place, and it never served him a better purpose than on this wintry night of which we write.

"Ben, my boy, I am very glad to meet you," declared Mr. Sheldon, as soon as he had entered the dugout; "we have been following a sledge-track since about noon to-day, and we see by your tracks that you have been following it also."

"Yes, sir, I have," answered the boy, betraying some agitation.

"What do you know about it, Ben?"

"Was it a friend of yours, Mr. Sheldon?" the boy asked, evasively.

"No, Ben; we have been in pursuit of that sledge for the villain in it abducted my daughter. But, night coming on us we sought shelter in this valley—following your track as we came in hopes of finding who you were, and learning what you knew, if anything, of the occupants of that sledge."

"Oh, that's what you mean?" exclaimed Ben, with an air of great relief. "I was afraid when you first spoke I'd got myself into trouble, and mebby I have, anyhow. Poor Miss Florence—but, I'll tell you: I thought there was somethin' wrong as soon as I saw that sledge, for the man hurried his elk forward at double-quicke the moment I come over the hill in sight. I knowed no honest man'd run from a boy trampin' it alone through sich a snow, and somethin'—I don't know what—tempted me to raise my rifle and try a shot at that man's head. I thought at fust I'd hit him, but as he didn't keel over I concluded I didn't. But, that same 'somethin'' prompted me to foller him and I struck out, jist as a feller will after a Jack-o'-lantern. From the zigzaggy way his old elk swung along, I come to the conclusion ag'in that my bullet had hit the feller, but it'll be all the wuss for poor Miss Florence if I did and he's dead or even wounded."

"Then you didn't see Florence in the sledge?"

"No, I didn't think about any one else bein' in it, but I remember seein' a bundle of somethin' in the sled before the man. I expect it was her bundled up, I do so."

"How close were you to the sledge, Ben?"

"Oh, I reckon I war a hundred long steps or more. But I wish now that I'd 'a' known that Florence war in that sledge and I'd 'a' brought that elk down easy; but I didn't, confound the luck, and so when I had follered along fernent this dugout, an' seein' a storm war comin', I concluded to turn in here, knowin' that when I war here four weeks ago I'd left a nice lot of fuel. The Good Samaritan Ranch is the only other place north within twenty miles of here, and you ar'n't a-goin' to git me alone into a ranch that's run by spooks."

A faint smile flitted over the face of Herbert Renfrew.

Amos Sheldon sat down—his heart full of bitter anguish and his mind almost distracted.

"You think, Ben," the unhappy father finally

said, "that it will be impossible to follow that sledge to-night?"

"I do, for a serious fact," replied the boy; "if it weren't goin' to storm, we could go it all right. But say, I reckon you didn't see any Injin signs over your way, did ye?"

"No; why, Ben?"

"Why, I crossed a trail of about a dozen or twenty warriors to-day headed south-west."

"You did?" exclaimed Renfrew, in apparent alarm. "What do you think they were up to, Ben?"

"Well, I can't say, egzactly. Ingins hardly ever go on the war-path at this season o' the year, but since I've hearn of Miss Florence's capture, I've been thinkin' some. She might 'a' been carried off by the white man in order to draw all the men away from The Corners in pursuit, while the Ingins walked in and killed and burned the settlement."

"Oh, my God!" cried Sheldon, clutching his brow as if mad, "if I should return and find our friends all massacred—"

"But look here, neighbor," suggested Renfrew, "there are at least twenty brave men left at The Corners, and no twenty or twice twenty red-skins dare venture there."

"It might only 'a' been a huntin' party," continued Ben, "or what is worse, folks, than all, it might 'a' been a party comin' out to intercept them that undertook to foller the sledge and rescue Florence. But if they want to tackle us, let 'em tack."

Although but a boy of eighteen, Roving Ben was a noted character along the Cheyenne. His experience on the prairie—not only as a hunter of game, but outlaws and red-skins also—was fully recognized by the settlers as that of one whose opinions and advice were worthy of careful consideration.

Before the party was aware of the fact, it was night without, and a fearful snow-storm was raging. The snow was pouring over the bank and piling up in a drift in front of the "dugout" at a rate that would soon completely block the entrance. But of this the party cared nothing, and so the next three or four hours were passed in dreadful suspense.

It must have been nearly midnight, however, when the monotony of the hour was broken by a human figure bursting into the "dugout" through the snow-bank in front, and confronting our friends.

It was an Indian warrior!

If the settlers were startled by the unceremonious intrusion of the savage, the savage was thunderstruck by the presence of the settlers. He started back with a sharp cry—the light seeming to dazzle his eyes.

But the cry from his lips was answered from without by a dozen companions who caught sight of the light within through the break in the snow-bank.

In an instant the six whites were upon their feet, revolvers in hand.

The savages were hostiles, and no doubt, as Roving Ben had predicted, were acting in concert with Florence Sheldon's abductor. The storm coming on, they had sought shelter at the dugout unaware of the presence of the settlers there.

A conflict was inevitable. One by one the savages began to crowd into the place. Prompt action was necessary on the part of our friends, for the odds were against them. Roving Ben was the first to act. Raising his rifle and covering the breast of the first intruder, he exclaimed:

"Red-skin, you must git out o' here; this hole won't hold us all."

The Indian uttered a defiant ejaculation, and quick as a flash raised his tomahawk to bury it in the boy's brain; but the low roof of the dugout caught the descending weapon, and before he could repeat his movement a bullet crashed through his brain and he sunk dead without a groan.

This was the signal for the conflict. A fierce yell burst from the lips of the dead warrior's friends, who, drawing their knives and tomahawks, rushed toward the whites. But they were met by a deadly fire from six revolvers. Five of their number went down. One of them fell across the fire, wrapping the cave in gloom. Still the revolvers of the whites rung out, and with a howl of dismay the surviving red-skins beat a hasty retreat from the dugout, leaving their dead and wounded with the victors.

The conflict had been short and decisive.

The dead Indian was removed from over the fire, which soon blazed up again and relieved the cave of its gloom. The thick, sulphurous smoke from the revolvers hung in the air. Three dead savages lay upon the floor. Three

others who had been wounded were endeavoring to crawl from the dugout.

"Let 'em go," said Ben, "let 'em go out an' cool off and tell their friends that six cyclones are stoppin' over night in this hole."

Phil Acklin, a strong, powerful man, took up the dead warriors one by one and pitched them outside where the storm would weave them a winding sheet.

"Boys, we are in for it now," warned Herbert Renfrew. "Them fellows outside will watch this place and shoot us down when we appear, if it takes a week's watching. There's at least a dozen of them yet."

"Don't worry 'bout that, folks," said Roving Ben, "we're good for twenty of them now that we know they're about, and while they are tryin' to starve us out o' this hole, the chances are that they'll freeze stiff, confound 'em. I reckon they'll shelter under the bank of the creek now and leave a man to watch us; but just as soon as this storm lets up, I'll figger a little on our situation."

So they sat down to wait and watch. The hours went by. Ever and anon Ben looked out. Finally he announced that the storm had ceased and that the moon was shining at intervals through rifts in the clouds.

The channel of the stream was drifted full of snow. A great drift had formed in front of the dugout. Roving Ben cleared a way out and then ventured to look out. But not a thing could he see save the white snow, the white-faced moon, the drifting clouds.

In his eagerness and impatience, Mr. Sheldon advanced to the boy's side. They stood just outside the dugout.

Mr. Sheldon glanced around him and up at the sky.

"The storm is not over with," he decided.

"No, sir; it's only quit to get a better start. It'll be whoopin' it down again in a short time, confound it," protested Ben, in his annoyance. But, scarcely had the last words fallen from the boy's lips, when a snow-pile near them broke up, a savage sprung to his feet—shedding his blanket as he rose, and with a drawn tomahawk and unearthly yell, leaped toward the boy hunter. Ben saw his danger and acted promptly. Instead of leaping away from the savage he sprung toward him so quick that the red-skin could not use his hatchet. He seized the warrior around the waist. Then the red-man dropped his hatchet and the two grappled. A knife in the hand of one or the other flashed in the moonlight as they went down in the snow—rolled over into the channel of the creek and disappeared under fifteen feet of snow.

"My God!" cried Amos Sheldon, "Roving Ben is lost! He can never escape that savage under—"

A tomahawk thrown by an unseen hand whizzed past the settler's head, cutting short his words. He sprung back into the dugout.

The moon plunged under a cloud. The wind swept over the plain, and the storm again burst forth with a renewed and unabated fury.

CHAPTER VIII.

AN ODD OLD CUSTOMER.

THE hearts of the besieged settlers were filled with gloom and sorrow. Death by starvation or Indian bullets seemed to be their impending fate. That the brave boy, Roving Ben, was already dead, they had not a doubt. Even if he had not died by the red-skin's hand, he must soon have perished with suffocation under that deep snow, for it would have been impossible to extricate himself, the banks being high and perpendicular.

"Well, the sorrows and dangers of The Corners have all come at once," observed Squire Van Roe sadly.

"It has been brewing—threatened for more than a year," replied Sheldon, "and the abduction of my child was the first step in the cruel work. God only knows how those at home are faring. I am satisfied that these Indians are acting in concert with the abductor of my child, as Roving Ben predicted."

"Well, so far, they all seem to have got the worst of the bargain," said Renfrew, "for with the exception of poor Ben, we have not lost a man. And if it should turn very cold between this and morning I'm thinking the red gentlemen will either make another attempt to capture this retreat, or retire to their own distant wigwams in the hills. If they should leave and give us a chance, we might move on to The Samaritan Ranch and take lodgings."

"Yes, and when we got over there we'd find it full of Injins or spooks," demurred a superstitious settler.

Again a smile passed over the face of Ren-

frew. He had always scouted the idea of the ranch being the abode of spirits.

In the course of an hour the snow had again blockaded the door of the dugout. But despite this fact, a sound like a far-off cry reached the ears of the besieged. In a moment they were upon their feet, revolvers in hand.

There was a shout near the door, and the next instant the snow-drift before the entrance burst inward and a figure rose before them. It was Roving Ben, the Boy Hunter, alive and unharmed, his face aglow with triumph, his hair dripping with melting snow and clinging in scraggy locks to his temples.

A shout of joy greeted the appearance of the boy whom they had mourned as dead.

"Ben, my boy!" exclaimed Sheldon, "when I saw you go over the bank into the snow-drift with that savage, I gave you up as lost."

"It was kind o' dark down under that snow-pile, but I found my way out," responded the lad; "you can't lose me in a snow-drift; and oh, gosh! what a luscious fight I had with that red-skin! You see, as I embraced him with both arms around the waist to prevent him from usin' his little hatchet on me, my hand passed a knife in his girdle, and I pulled it right out and as we rolled into the snow-drift, I put the blade into his kidneys in a way that made him sick at the stomach, and he curled up like a sick bear and let me alone, blast his greasy hide! But I war nighly smothered in the snow. The stuff got into my eyes and ears and hair and lungs, and I puffed and snorted around on the ice of the frozen crick like a buck flounderin' in mud. But finally I found myself in an open space under the bank where the snow had not drifted. I halted there—wheezed the snow out of my lungs and tightened my collar to keep the drifts from formin' along my back-bone, then I crawled along under the bank for several rods till I came to where the bank was slopin' and I could get out o' the channel. By a little tunnelin' I reached the upper world, and jist peekin' out above the snow I looked around to see whar I was and what was goin' on. At fust I didn't see anything, but as it grew a little lighter what should I see but a sledge with an elk to it go sweepin' along the ridge above me? It war the very same outfit, I know, that I shot at yesterday. The man war still in the sledge, and the elk war goin' fast but as though it war gittin' awful tired."

"Was there any one else in the sledge?" quickly inquired Amos Sheldon.

"It looked as if there war some one bundled up and settin' at the man's feet."

A groan burst from Sheldon's lips.

"Do you still think, Ben," he asked, "that the man in the sledge is dead?"

"I do, Mr. Sheldon; I'm afraid that shot of mine done more damage than good, even if it did kill that villain."

"Florence is dead too—it cannot be otherwise. Men, I cannot stay here; I must go in search of my child!"

"Wait, Mr. Sheldon," plead Ben; "the redskins'll soon have to give up the siege for it's growin' colder'n blixes, and they'll have to pike out for—Jee-rus'lem! look-out!"

A wild, fiendish yell burst upon the ears of the party and the next moment a savage leaped headlong into the dugout and fell sprawling upon the floor. He was followed by half a score of others who thought with their frightful war-whoops, to frighten the whites into silent terror; but they were mistaken in their foe, for they were met by a deadly fire that sent them flying in dismay from the dugout, leaving three of their number lying motionless upon the ground.

Another bloodless victory for the settlers. A shout of triumph burst from their lips.

"I reckon they'll not come snortin' in here ag'in, confound 'em," observed Roving Ben; "but lookee here, Acklin, you're the Sampson o' this outfit—s'pose you skid these carcasses out into the snow-bank—no room for Ingin stiffs in here."

In compliance with this request, the big settler took up one of the dead bodies and pitched it into the snow-drift outside. He then stooped and laid hold of another, but the body moved, the eyes opened and the lips moved. The savage was not dead. In good English he bawled out:

"Hold up, stranger—don't ye fire me out."

Acklin started back as if from the hiss of a serpent. Sheldon drew his revolver. Roving Ben stooping peered into the man's face. A deep silence reigned. Surprise and astonishment were written upon every face. The supposed red-skin looked up and around and then burst into a peal of rollicking laughter.

"Old Kit Bandy! or I hope I may never fly. Confound it!" exclaimed Roving Ben, apparently beside himself with joy.

"Who's Kit Bandy?" demanded Renfrew, provoked at the man's queer conduct.

"Why, he's one of the famousest old mountain detectives you ever run across," declared Ben.

"Mountain fraud," snapped Squire Van Roe; "he looks like a detective—a whole band of them, he does."

"I'll confess, strangers," the man said, rising to his feet, "that I, Christopher Columbus Bandy, make no claim to beauty nor grace, but I'm ole Kit Bandy all the same. Ben thar knows me—Ben, how've ye been, yer little sardine? Lardy, but I thought that cussed red war goin' to git away 'ith you, boy."

"Stranger," declared Sheldon, "you must give us some further proof of who you are; the company with which you have been found is not a very good recommendation."

The old man turned, walked to the door, took up a handful of snow and vigorously rubbed his face with it until the paint and dirt had been thoroughly washed off, then turning to the astonished settlers he asked:

"Any improvement?"

No one answered, for most of them were in doubt whether he was a better looking white man than Indian. In either character he was a decidedly homely man. He was tall and angular, with arms like dismantled masts, a small head with closely cropped hair, large ears, small gray eyes with shaggy brows, a mouth altogether too large for his face and an expression odd and comical.

Roving Ben was the first to break the momentary silence with an outburst of boyish laughter.

"I know," said the queer old genius, "as I said before, that I'm not an Adonis—a sweet-william—a bird of Paradise in looks—that in construction I'm not a sculptor's model; but I've a sweet disposition and child-like simplicity—a love for adventure that borders on madness, and a gentle love for fightin' that beats fourteen catamouts. I'm a full mule-team and a brindle dog, I am, by the horn of Joshua! and Christopher Columbus Bandy is my name, by gravy? Six months ago, fellow-citizens, I war directed by government authorities to look out for a band of counterfeiters that was supposed to be located somewhar 'long the upper Missouri, or in the Black Hills region. I worked all summer 'long the Missouri but found no fraudulent money-makers, and so I hied me into the West among the hills, but there I fell into bad company. The Ingins were in a feverish condition borderin' on open war on you settlers. They made me prisoner on suspicion of being a scout and spy, and I tell you they came mortal nigh sizlin' me alive, but I played my part so well that they postponed the matter a few days, and in that time I convinced 'em that I'd as lief be an Injin as a white man, and prevailed on 'em to adopt me under the name of White Waif. They did it with ceremony and then I war given the freedom of the camp, but I noticed every day that a warrior war detailed to dog my footsteps and watch me. But I war equal to the occasion. I made myself happy and at home and went to making love to a dusky maiden o' sixteen with good and promisin' results. This established the red-skins' faith in my conversion, though I must confess that I led Sabina Stump to the altar o' wedded bliss thirty odd years agone. Seein' I war fast Inginizin', the chief detailed me and seventeen other warriors to go on this expedition and—"

"What was this expedition sent out for?" interrupted Sheldon.

"There, now you've got me, stranger," continued Bandy, "unless it was to take you fellows in. You see, they didn't let me into the secret—only give me to understand that I war to take the war-path and prove my worthiness of an Ingin wife by valor on the gory field of battle. I am of the opinion, howsumever, that the red-skins are acting in the interest of some white villains that have been hanging 'round the village off an on, and the way our leader—I mean chief—has been hangin' long this plain to-day I'm beginnin' to think you are the fellers we are after. This dugout was fixed upon as our night's campin' ground, and the storm settin' in made us a leetle late in gettin' here, and when we did arrive, lo and behold, by the horn of Joshua! it war occupied. The chief war the man that led the way here and into the hole, I bringin' up the rear in a gallant manner, thereby escapin' your first reception of cold lead. Since then we've been hoverin' along the bank like a flock of dog-worried sheep—the wust lookin' band of noble warriors that ever

went forth to conquer or die. Our chief war dead and no one to lead, and I see'd my time to disorganize as an Ingin had come, but I must use some policy. I called a council of war, and with snow whistlin' around me and eddyin' into my face, I made one of the most ringin', eloquent, blood-stirrin' speeches to them shiverin' red-skins, as ever fired a savage heart. It set them warriors on edge. They told me to take the lead and they'd foller me. The lead in a charge was more'n I'd figgered on seein' what stuff you fellers war made of, but knowin' you could lick forty sich half-frozen crews, I consented to lead—I couldn't get out o' it since I'd talked so grandiloquent, and so we started for this ranch. When nigh the door I made a quick lunge through the snow drift, and aimed to fall ju t a little afore your bullets could git to me, but I come mortal nigh over-doin' it by fallin' too quick—I war afraid you'd plug me whar I lay, but my braves comin' close at my heels drew your fire, and the thing worked and I war no longer an Ingin. Ben, there, knows me—knows I couldn't tell a lie more'n the great George Washington."

"Yes, I do know Kit Bandy, and that's him," answered Ben; "I got acquainted with him last summer at the Agency."

"But don't you trust me, men, if ye think I'm not all right—disarm me—tie me up and feed me well and I'll not complain. This is not the fust time I've been found in bad company; a mountain detective has to go through fire and blood—play double and thrible if he catches a rogue. But, it's nothin' to a man whose wife has ruled the roost as my spouse, Sabina Bandy, did afore I sought refuge in a cold, heartless world. The wrinkles of domestic care are still on my brow where she fetched me a few love taps with the skillet and the poker and the garden hoe. But nature has been kind to me—kind in furnishin' me a new epidermis every time Bina peeled the old one off with water at boiling heat. Yes, I've been havin' a rough and tumble life of it ever since the neighbors, headed by Granny Smouse called at the cabin of Sol Bandy, fifty-eight years ago, to welcome me into a world of trouble and sin. But nature wern't prodigal of her trimmings on me in the way of beauty; but she piled on a hull mule-team and brindle dog power in fightin' qualities—"

"And wern't skrimpin' in her gift of lip, neither," observed Ben, facetiously, believing the man would never get through.

"No, son," Bandy went on, "but if you think I can talk, you'd oughter hear Sabina Bandy one hour. Horn of Joshua! She can say four hundred and nine words 'ithout breathin' and knit a stitch atween words and all in thirty-nine seconds. It'd take yer breath at fust, and then every word comes out so sharp and derringer-like that you'd stand and bat yer eyes as tho' they war flashes of lightnin'. But I'm off from home now on a vacation from domestic strife; and now, gentlemen, you know who I be, and I'm at your service—yours to command."

"I believe you said you did not know what you were sent over here for," said Mr. Sheldon.

"No; but takin' everything into consideration now, I think it must 'a' been to intercept you."

"What time did you leave the Indian village?"

"This mornin'."

"Well, we didn't leave The Corners until about noon, and had never contemplated leaving until a few minutes before we started, so the Indians could not have anticipated our coming."

"They might, stranger, in connection [with some other deviltry they had planned to draw you out here]," said Bandy.

"Ah! that's the point, exactly," said Mr. Renfrew; "the abduction of Florence had been planned, and knowing, or at least fearing pursuit would be made, the Indians were sent out here to cover the abductor's escape; but thanks to a good, kind Providence they failed in stoppin' us."

"Did ye say somebody 'd been abducted?" questioned Bandy.

"My daughter was carried away to-day by a villain driving an elk-sledge," replied Mr. Sheldon.

"Blast the horn that tumbled Jericho's walls!" exclaimed Bandy; "then some white devils are at the bottom of all this. These Ingins are only tools, I'll bet my weddin' moccasins. I remember now, another party of Ingins were sent to The Good Samaritan Ranch. I'd like to 'a' gone there myself, for I want to investigate that place. It may be the rendezvous

of the white scoundrels that's makin' all this trouble, and they may be the very men I'm after, too. Ye can't poke it down my throat that there's any o' the ghosts o' St. Bernard monks hangin' round in this country feedin' Ingins and outlaws. It's too hazy—I'd as soon think wings were sproutin' on the shoulders of Sabina Bandy preparatory to her becomin' an angel."

"Bandy," said Sheldon, "if you are not playing double with us, as with the Indians, I am satisfied from what you say that my child's abduction has been a well-concocted and executed plan."

"No doubt of it, friend; I know the Ingins and outlaws are close friends, and I'd like to be able to take in a few o' them gay mountainers, as they call themselves. If this storm should subside and the weather don't turn too blisterin' cold, we might start out in search for your darter. Ye needn't be afraid o' my folks now, for it war understood that in case of a second defeat we war to pull for the hills. I reckon they pulled—mournin' the loss of their new and dashin' chief, White Waif."

Kit Bandy, if he had really told the truth all along, was voted a queer old customer whose peculiar adventures were characteristic of the adventurer. Had Ben not fully vouched for his honor, however, it is doubtful whether the settlers would have trusted him out of their sight or not.

Before the party was scarcely aware of it, morning had dawned. With the coming of light the storm ceased.

The settlers shared their rations with Kit Bandy and Roving Ben; then they left the dug-out and started across the plain in the direction the sledge had been going.

Not the sign of a red-skin was to be seen. The sledge track had been covered under several inches of new snow.

The weather was rather gloomy. A cold, raw wind was blowing from the north-east, and fleecy gray clouds hanging along the horizon told that the storm might be renewed at any time.

In hopes, however, of finding some trace of the sledge the party pressed on toward the hills. The walking was laborious, for the snow was deep, but the redoubtable Kit Bandy and the jolly hearted Roving Ben kept up the spirits of the party by words of encouragement and salutes of whimsical wit and humor, of which both were possessed.

It was nearly noon when suddenly Old Kit stopped and exclaimed:

"There!—down!—the sledge!"

Being taller than any one of the settlers Kit alone had discovered that mysterious sledge just over a swell in the plain before them.

All quickly knelt in the snow, and in a moment the elk appeared in sight, dragging the sledge behind, but at sight of our friends, the animal stopped, and looking at them for a moment, turned to the right and dashed away with alarm.

In the sledge still sat the motionless driver, while before him still remained that bundled form.

"Shoot the elk, Ben! shoot the elk!" cried Amos Sheldon excitedly; "save my child though she be living or dead, for she is there—I know she is there!"

The sledge was now nearly four hundred yards away, but Roving Ben was a remarkable shot, and he resolved to know the secret of the sledge if possible, and resting his rifle on Old Kit Bandy's shoulder, he took a careful aim at the flying elk and touched the trigger.

As the piece rung out the elk was seen to throw up its head, stumble to its knees and fall.

"By the toot that tumbled Jericho's wall!" cried Old Kit Bandy, "that war a wonderful fine shot, my boy!"

The party started toward the sledge. An awful feeling of fear and suspense seized upon them as they drew near the vehicle, for in every mind arose the thought as to what dreadful horror the sledge would reveal.

CHAPTER IX.

A MESSENGER WITH SAD TIDINGS.

WITH bated breath and distended eyes the party approached the sledge. They soon came so close that they could see the elk still struggling in the throes of death, as they supposed—so close that Mr. Sheldon recognized, beyond doubt, the shawl Florence had worn to the Hermitage, when to their bitter surprise the elk bounded to its feet and with a strange sound dashed away with the sledge at a long swinging trot, and at such a wonderful speed as would have defied the swiftest horse or hound.

"Ram's-horn of Joshua!" cried Old Bandy; "Ben, your bullet only stunned that critter."

"Shoot again, Ben—quick!" cried Sheldon, trembling with excitement.

Roving Ben brought his rifle to bear upon the animal again, but the boy was nervous with excitement, his hand unsteady, and his bullet went wide of the mark; and in a few minutes the sledge was well away on the snowy plain.

The party advanced to where the elk had fallen. There were a few drops of blood on the snow.

"He's wounded, boys," declared Old Kit; "let's foller him up to the polar regions but what we git him."

"Oh, my poor child!" cried Sheldon in bitter anguish, "she is dead—has perished in the storm; but better that than to have died a lingering death in the power of some human fiend!"

"Let us hope for the best," said Renfrew.

"There is no hope of her being alive, Renfrew. She would have moved—shown some signs of life when the elk was down and we so near, had she been living. Yes, I am satisfied that she too, is sitting there dead with that terrified elk dragging her here and there over this awful plain."

"Hullo! what's that?" suddenly exclaimed Old Kit, whose eagle eyes were ever on the alert.

"A horseman! a horseman!" replied Roving Ben.

And a horseman it was coming as fast as the animal could make his way through the snow.

"It's Tom Runkles from The Corners!" declared Phil Acklin.

"Oh, heavens! I wonder what has happened there?" moaned Mr. Sheldon.

The horseman plunged on through the snow and drew up before the excited party.

"Tom, in heaven's name what is the matter?" demanded Sheldon before the rider had time to speak.

"Bad enough," replied Runkles. "Miss Renfrew has been spirited away too."

"What?" cried Renfrew, his face turning deadly pale, "my child a captive too?"

"Yes, sir," answered Runkles, "she disappeared some time yesterday in the afternoon. Your colored man and his wife didn't know a thing about her, and they acted awful queer, too."

"Why so, Tom?" asked Renfrew, a change coming over his face.

"They never opened their heads about it till this morning."

Mr. Renfrew bit his lip and knitted his brows as he glanced away across the plain toward The Good Samaritan Ranch. To all it seemed that a fearful struggle was going on in his breast.

"Go on, men!" he at length exclaimed, "let us know the fate of Florence. Perhaps where one is there will the other also be found. If Marion has been abducted it was done by the same villains that abducted Florence. We must not divide our force—we're approaching the enemy's stronghold."

A short consultation followed. Mr. Sheldon proposed that the party divide up, part go in search of Marion while he and the others continue the pursuit of the sledge. But to this Renfrew objected, and finally the whole party accompanied by Runkles moved on after the sledge.

The horse being ridden in advance helped to break a path through the snow—making the footing less wearisome.

In this way they had journeyed some little distance when Kit Bandy—who, with Mr. Sheldon, was walking some distance in the rear of the party, asked:

"Mr. Sheldon, who is that Mr. Renfrew?"

"One of our settlers," replied Sheldon, not a little puzzled by the reputed detective's question.

"I know, but where did he come from, and what does he follow?" Bandy continued.

"He is a wealthy retired merchant from St. Joe, who, being in poor health, located temporarily with us for the benefit of his health. But why, Bandy, do you ask these questions?"

"Oh, I knew he was a city chap, by his hands and his lack of prairie manners," replied Bandy; but this answer did not satisfy Sheldon. He believed the old detective had placed Renfrew under some suspicion; but of what he could not conceive.

In the course of a few hours the party found itself at the base of the foot-hills, and that the sledge had turned into a valley leading back into the wooded hills.

"We'll get him now," said Renfrew, "without a doubt."

"Yes," said Bandy, "but this valley may lead right around that hill and come back into the plain on t'other side. One or two men had better go round on t'other side of the hill and be sure that the critter don't escape us again. I'll go for one."

"And I for another," put in Roving Ben, and the two at once departed.

Herbert Renfrew, who had become somewhat fatigued, was induced to mount Runkles's horse. He rode on in advance, following in the track of the sledge, which finally turned where the valley forked and went back toward the plain. This was just as Old Kit had predicted, but he had not counted on there being three prongs to the fork, as was the case, and while he and Ben had gone up the *right* prong, the sledge had turned and gone down the *left*, and back toward the plain.

"I will ride back down the valley a ways," said Renfrew, "and cut across the ridge to the other side and head the elk off if I can."

So saying, he rode back a ways and then crossed the hill, and as he entered the valley beyond, he discovered the sledge half a mile below. The elk was standing still cropping some bushes that grew at the foot of the high and almost perpendicular bluff that extended for a mile or more up and down the opposite side of the valley.

As Renfrew could not see his friends yet, he concluded to cross back over the ridge and come into the valley again below the elk, so as to prevent its escape to the plain. He turned his horse, and just then an arrow from an unseen hand came hurtling through the air and struck the horse on the shoulder.

With a snort of pain the animal made a wild leap and dashed down the valley at a terrible speed. Mr. Renfrew tried hard to control the animal, but it was a spirited steed and had become frantic with the pain of the rankling arrow sticking in his flesh, and taking the bits in his teeth defied the strength of his rider to check him. But in his headlong career the animal stumbled over a rock hidden under the deep snow and fell, turning a complete somersault. In an instant, however, it was upon its feet and gone, but it was riderless.

Renfrew, with a fractured leg, lay half buried in the snow.

A fiendish yell rose on the air. The disabled man raised himself and looked up the canyon, and to his terror beheld a score of savages coming toward him like infuriated demons.

A shout came from the opposite side of the canyon. The wounded man turned his eyes in that direction. He saw two men accompanied by several dogs running toward him. He recognized them as Hercules Dick and Frank Morton. His courage rose—he struggled to his knees. The two young men came up to where he stood. The Indians were not over a hundred yards away.

"Gods! Renfrew!" cried the Boy Hercules, "you are in deadly peril! Why tarry here? Can't you walk?"

"No, Dick; my leg is—"

But Bloodhound Dick waited for no more. He handed his rifle to Morton, and lifting Renfrew in his arms as though he had been a child, ran with him across the valley. He soon reached the towering bluff. The mouth of a cavern opened before them. It was the same in which the two men were concealed at the time of Renfrew's mishap. Into this cavern Dick bore the wounded man and placed him on a blanket by the side of a fire in the rear of the retreat, then he hastened back to the entrance to assist Morton in repelling the yelling demons that were rushing toward the place.

The quick bark of revolvers rung through the cavern. The hounds of the boy giant flew at the throats of the savages, and the screams and yells that issued from those mangled throats were awful.

From where he lay Renfrew could see the combatants quite distinctly. He saw Frank Morton fall from a blow on the head. He saw the savages pressing inward. He saw the young Hercules standing erect with no weapon but his fists, dealing terrible blows right and left that resounded through the cavern. His colossal form seemed surrounded by death, and yet he seemed like a charmed life; and like a mighty Vulcan he stood firm in his tracks, forging thunderbolt after thunderbolt that sent savage after savage to earth, bruised and bleeding.

Here and there a savage was down with a hound at his throat and his knife in the body or heart of the dog—both motionless in death.

In a few moments Frank Morton, who had only been slightly stunned, recovered, staggered to his feet, and drawing another revolver, opened fire on the foe. This proved the turning-point in the tide of the unequal conflict. The savages wavered, fell back, and finally, with a cry of dismay, turned and fled like terrified sheep, leaving the indomitable Dick and his friend Morton masters of the situation.

But the victory was a dearly bought one for the Boy Hercules. All of his noble dogs, save one, lay dead or dying among the savages that had fallen. Frank Morton, when the excitement of the conflict had ended, found that he was more seriously hurt than he had supposed, but the boy giant himself had escaped unscathed.

Four wounded Indians were permitted to depart with their lives, having first been disarmed.

Then Herbert Renfrew called Dick to where he lay and taking the big fellow by the hand, said:

"My brave and noble fellow, let me thank you from the bottom of my heart for your kindness to me in saving my life. You have placed me under eternal obligations to you. Leonidas himself never defended the pass of Thermopylae with more daring valor than did you the entrance to this cave. I am sorry to see your dumb friends, that I am told you like so well, nearly all slain."

"Thank you, Mr. Renfrew, for your kind words. I do not know that I deserve so much praise; for I only did my duty the best I knew how. True, all my favorite dogs except one have been slain, but I assure you, Mr. Renfrew," and a smile passed over the young giant's noble face, "that I am not nearly out of dogs yet. I have just twenty more at my ranch, and I would give anything if I had them here now; for, thank the good powers, old Rove, my favorite dog and leader of the pack, still lives and is good for the throttles of many red-skins yet."

Returning to the entrance, Dick saw that the coast was clear of enemies, then went back and proceeded to bind up the wounds of Morton and Renfrew. He found the latter had sustained a slight fracture of one of the bones of the leg between the ankle and knee. Morton's wound was on the head from the handle of a flying tomahawk—not at all dangerous but painful.

When Dick had finished his rude surgical work, he replenished the fire with some pine sticks, and sat down to reload his revolvers and rest his overtaxed body.

Meanwhile Renfrew and Morton had entered into conversation. The abduction of Florence, the mysterious elk-sledge and its occupants and the meeting with Gleason and the savages and the conflict at The Samaritan Ranch, as well as the news that Runkles brought, were fully discussed. But the fate of Florence, as well as the fate of Marion, were wrapt in mystery still.

Frank Morton's physical pain was nothing compared with the bitter anguish of his heart. His wedding day was more sad and gloomy than a funeral day, and he became so despondent that he mentally wished that the blow he had received, had ended his misery. Hitherto he had born up manly, bravely, for there had been some hope all along until he had met Mr. Renfrew and heard his story.

Bloodhound Dick was silent, but Renfrew noticed that he became greatly agitated by the news that Runkles brought of Marion's disappearance. Yet the ex-merchant never dreamed of the secret of the young giant's great, noble heart—that he loved his daughter.

In their sadness of heart a silence came over the party, but it was suddenly broken by the hound, Rove, starting up with a low growl, and looking in the direction indicated by the fixed gaze of the animal, Bloodhound Dick saw that which caused him to start up with a cry of alarm.

CHAPTER X.

A NEW FOE AND ANOTHER STRUGGLE.

THE cavern in which the three men were entrenched was a spacious, irregular chamber in the solid rock with high roof and rough, jagged walls. In the back part of the cave was a large hole or passage leading further back into the hill—no doubt into another chamber. It was toward this hole that Dick's hound drew the attention of the three men, when to their horror they saw a large bear emerge therefrom, stop, sniff the air and take in the situation with a hungry, feroeious look. Nor was he alone, for there immediately followed him into the cave

another full grown bear and two young ones over half grown.

Frank Morton sat leaning against the wall not six feet from the bears. Renfrew reclined on the ground a little further away. Dick sat on the opposite side of the fire, but the moment he rose, the hound leaped through the air and seized the nearest bear. Uttering a growl the huge beast brushed the dog aside with its paw so violently that it lay motionless in apparent death upon the ground.

Frank Morton shot one of the young bears through the brain, and as it sunk down, a ferocious growl was uttered by the others. Again Frank's revolver spoke and the other young one rolled over dead. The mother bear, that turned upon the slayer of her young, drew the fire of Hercules Dick. His bullet struck her in the eye. With a fierce, unearthly cry the bear whirled around clawing madly at her eyes. Another shot from Dick's big navy brought her to the earth. By this time the male had become frantic, and rushed upon Morton, who seemed to be the object of the whole bear-family's fury. The young Indian Agent attempted to elude the animal, but he was not quick enough and received a blow that laid him half stunned upon the earth.

Bloodhound Dick, who had been placed at a disadvantage from the beginning of the fight, now sprung between Renfrew and the bear as Morton went down and endeavored to put a bullet through the animal's brain; but the shot being a side one the ball glanced from the skull and with a fierce growl Bruin turned upon the young giant. With the quickness of the lightning's flash, almost, the animal struck Dick's hand with its paw and sent his revolver spinning across the cavern.

The situation of our hero was now most critical. It seemed that the young giant had met his match—that he must go down unless he sought safety in flight. But this must be at the cost of Renfrew's life, and Dick was not the boy to desert a friend. He felt equal to the occasion and stood his post with faith in the prodigious physical strength with which God had endowed him. The bear was upon its haunches ready for the conflict—to strike another blow with its terrible paw. Its red jaws bung open—its eyes flashed like balls of fire.

Summoning all the strength of his giant form the Boy Hercules struck the bear a blow on the jaw with his fist that knocked the animal completely over roaring with pain. But in an instant it was up again, its nether jaw hanging open and drooling blood. Eluding the animal Dick dealt it another blow with his sledge-hammer fist; but this time the bear was too quick for him and catching his arm drew him toward it, and the next moment the young giant was hugged to the breast of the enraged brute and the two rolling in a death-struggle on the floor of the cavern.

Not a word escaped the lips of the Boy Hercules, but the bear kept up a fearful growling. It endeavored to bury its teeth in the boy's shoulder, but its jaws refused to perform their usual functions. They had been broken by that first terrific blow of the giant's sledge-hammer fist.

Powerful as the young hunter was he was no match in strength for that huge beast. Renfrew saw his danger—that he—the boy—could not cope successfully with the enraged beast even though its jaws were broken, and crawling to where a rifle was leaning against the cavern wall, he cocked it and waited his chance. It soon came. The boy and the bear rolled toward him, and placing the muzzle of the gun near the animal's head he pulled the trigger.

There was a dull report, a strangling growl. The bear's huge body became convulsed—its limbs rigid and the Boy Hercules felt the life being squeezed out of him. But this embrace lasted for only a moment. The bear's muscles relaxed—its great limbs fell limp and powerless, and Bloodhound Dick sprung to his feet—unharmed.

A shout of triumph burst from his lips.

"Thank the Lord you are safe again!" exclaimed Renfrew.

"Yes, and we're even now, Mr. Renfrew," replied the youth; "your timely shot pulled me through that time. Oh, but if that bear'd had the use of his jaws he'd a'chawed me into mince-meat! But I never want another sich a huggin' as that—not even from a gal—hullo, Frank, comin' round ag'in, be you?—bear give you a rippin' old left-hander, didn't he?—and look! by the eternal stars! old Rove's comin' round, too! Hup here, old dog; you shall have the choicest slice out of that bear's carcass."

"Good heavens, Dick!" exclaimed Frank

Morton, rising to his feet and glancing around him at the carcasses of the four bears; "did you get away with that whole bear family?"

"No, you killed two of them, then I fetched another, and then the head of the family fetched me to his bosom and we had an old fashion 'bar hug,' when Renfrew got in his work and finished the job."

"Well, I never got such a blow in my life," averred Morton; "there was a forty mule-heel power in that bear's arm."

"Well, I wonder what next?" asked Mr. Renfrew.

"Bear-meat broiled for dinner; bear-meat for supper; bear-meat till you can't rest," replied Dick. "I wish those other folks would come in and I would be in favor of a few minutes' rest and quiet. My bones are beginning to feel sore."

"I should think so, Dick," said Renfrew, "for I'm beginning to think you wasn't born to be killed—ah! there are some of our friends now out in the valley."

Dick advanced to the mouth of the cavern and called to the settlers, telling them where Renfrew was. Kit Bandy and Roving Ben were not with them.

The presence of the dead Indians at the entrance to the cave told of the bloody conflict that had been fought there.

The meeting of Amos Sheldon and Frank Morton was one of sadness and sorrow.

Renfrew inquired after Bandy and Roving Ben.

"Don't know what's become of them," answered Phil Acklin. "They hadn't come around the hill yet, and as we found lots of Ingin tracks comin' this way we did not wait for them, but hurried on to look for Mr. Renfrew. Just before you called to us we heard the report of guns over in Kit and Ben's direction, and I'm afraid somethin' has happened. Some of our folks are inclined to mistrust that old Bandy of playing double and are afraid he's played foul with Ben."

"Mistrust Kit Bandy?" exclaimed Bloodhound Dick; "if he's the true Kit Bandy—no fraud—he's one of the grandest old souls that ever manipulated a revolver or deceived an outlaw; you can depend upon that."

"Well, I am glad to hear it for we need true and tried friends now, if ever we did," was Acklin's reply.

"Boys," said Dick, "I'll run out and look after Kit and Ben if some of you'll lay to and skin one of them bears so's we can have a feast on roast bear when our crowd's all in."

"Be careful, Dick," cautioned Renfrew; "the Indians and the bears are against you and Morton to-day."

With a promise that he would, the Boy Hercules secured his revolvers and left the cavern.

"Gentlemen," said Renfrew, as the youth departed, "that fellow is one of Nature's noblemen; and such lion strength and courage—such daring bravery! I shall never forget how he looked as he stood in yonder entrance and beat down savage after savage as though they had been mere figures of wax; and then how he finally stood boldly up before that monster bear and dealt it one sturdy, powerful blow with his fist, breaking its jaw! Truly he is a Boy Hercules—a veritable Samson."

Meanwhile Dick was moving cautiously up the canyon. His big ox-eyes were ever on the alert.

Suddenly the sound of a pistol came to his ears and was followed by that hateful, fiendish, savage yell that had rung in his ears so often within the past twenty-four hours.

Running across the canyon the youth concealed himself under a ledge at the point of a ridge sloping down toward the valley. He had been there but a moment when Kit Bandy and Roving Ben sped apast him going down the valley and he knew they were being pursued by enemies. He was about to dash from his covert and follow them when the snow began pouring down before him from the ledge under which he stood and suddenly a savage, who was endeavoring to get in ahead of the fugitives, came rolling down over the ledge and fell in the snow at Dick's feet. At the same instant a yell as if from a hundred throats smote on the young giant's ears. It came from up the valley and a shower of bullets and arrows went whistling down apast him intended for Kit and Ben. These facts convinced our hero that his situation was precarious, but he realized it with the quickness of thought—even before the red-skin lying in the snow before him had risen—and decided upon a course of action.

Springing from his concealment he knocked the red-skin down just as he had regained his

feet—wrenched his tomahawk from his hand and his scalping-knife from his girdle; then seizing the lithe savage by the ankles he swung him around upon his back, his head hanging downward, his face outward and his heels on the giant's shoulders. Thus covered, Dick dashed away toward the cavern with a horde of yelling red-skins almost at his very heels.

Not an arrow nor a bullet dare the pursuers fire through fear of killing their friend who proved to be their chief; but they redoubled their exertions to overtake the young hunter who sped along with the Indian at his back as though he had been a mere child.

The chief's head dragged at times in the snow—at every bound was thumped by the heels of his captor. His arms beat and sawed the air in his endeavors to catch at something, while yell after yell burst from his throat.

The scene was as ludicrous as it was daring, and was witnessed by the friends at the cave who stood, rifles in hand, ready to give the savages a warm reception. Kit and Ben who had already joined their friends turned, and when Dick was within a rod of their retreat, opened fire on the pursuing red-skins and put a stop to their advance and forced them to flee as fast as they had come.

Bloodhound Dick bolted up to the entrance to the cave amid the shouts of his friends, and when he found he was safe, he released one of the savage's ankles, seized the other with both hands and swinging him around slung him fully a rod out into the snow.

The Indian, the very image of wild terror, gathered himself up and in his confusion of mind ran directly toward the cave, but seeing his mistake he turned and fled up the valley, followed by yells of derisive laughter.

In a moment not a savage was to be seen, when all turned and congratulated The Boy Hercules upon his novel and successful expedient to elude Indian bullets and arrows.

A kind of a reunion was now held in the cavern. The party now numbered ten persons, but Renfrew was not only helpless but a charge upon the kindness of his friends. To move him would be quite difficult in the face of the cold weather and long distance, for the party now expected they would be continually harassed by the Indians.

After discussing matters awhile Bloodhound Dick said:

"To-night, under cover of darkness, I'll steal away from here, folks, and go for help, and by to-morrow at furthest—unless something happens me—I'll be back with a party of twenty heroic fellows that the hull Ingin fraternity won't dare to attack."

Placing a man on guard at the entrance, the fire was replenished and for the next hour the party feasted themselves upon choice bits of bear-meat broiled on hot coals.

The day wore away and night fell cold and cloudy. The wind blew from the north and filled the air with fine snow, but despite the darkness and the inclement weather, Bloodhound Dick left the cavern for a long journey to procure the promised assistance. No persuasion or entreaties could keep him back. He plunged out into the darkness and storm as though it were his own element—reassuring his friends that he would be back by noon on the morrow.

A supply of fuel having been gathered in before night, the party kept their camp-fire burning and by it sat and talked or laid and slept as their feelings dictated.

Thus the long hours of that wintry night were passed and as the dawn of morning broke through the whirling storm, a strange sound was heard outside the cavern. A man was on guard at the entrance, but as no report came from him Kit Bandy hurried to see what was wrong. In a few minutes he returned accompanied by the indomitable Bloodhound Dick at whose heels followed a score of ferocious-looking hounds.

In a moment everybody was awake and up to greet the return of the young hunter with his promised help.

Some were disappointed when they found that the assistance was dogs instead of men, for the youth had left them under the impression that it was men he was going after.

"We were not expecting you back so soon, Dick," observed Renfrew.

"I didn't really expect to get back so soon, but fortunately I run across that horse that threw you yesterday, and catching the critter I mounted and rode to my ranch and back. He's a noble boss, Runkles, and I owe him a good rubbing down after awhile. I left him blanketed under the ledge where the storm

can't beat upon him. But, folks, what do you think of my pilgrims, here?"

"The dashestest ugly mess o' dogs I ever see'd," replied Old Kit nudging Frank Morton.

"You'd think so, Kitsie, to see 'em go in on their muscle," boasted Hercules, seating himself by one of the dead bears and with a keen knife slicing off bits of meat for the dogs; "that critter over there's got one of the best noses on him I ever saw. He can trail a bird through the air, I do believe; and *that one*—"indicating the dog by tossing a chunk of meat into the animal's jaws at a distance of fifteen feet—"has the greatest endurance of any of my folks now living. Old Rove here is the boss leader, and this one over here is noted for his sweet and charming music on the trail. Then over yonder is old Surety,"—and Surety caught a chunk of meat as big as his head almost, and swallowed it at a single gulp—"whose appetite is always good and who is always behind on the chase, but manages somehow or other to always get there soon as any of them when there's chawin' to be done."

Thus the young hunter sat expatiating upon the merits of his dogs until half of a young bear had disappeared down their capacious maws.

By this time it was broad daylight. The weather had moderated somewhat. The wind had gone down, but it was still snowing. Large damp flakes were falling straight to the ground filling the air with a dreary, fog-like haze that half concealed the great, pine-clad hills.

"Jist sich a lazy lummix of a storm," declared Old Kit, "that I alers liked when a school-boy in the Coshocton valley. Lord! if we could only git a rabbit or a deer or an elk or a behemoth started and them hound's after it, you'd hear some music come floatin' thro' this snow-storm that'd make the heart of a mummy glad."

"I'm going to take a look for that sledge, folks," said Dick. "I thought, in comin' in this morning that I could see the half obliterated track of the sledge in the snow, and I know I see'd where some animal had been croppin' the bushes. Who's the feller that'll join me with a good rifle to do the shootin' while I manage the dogs?"

"I'm your huckleberry," said Roving Ben, and in a few minutes the boys, with the hounds at their heels, were moving down the canyon toward the open plain.

"Dash it!" exclaimed Old Kit regretfully, "if I war a youngster I'd be off 'ith them boys and dogs. I war raised 'ith hounds, and, horn of Joshua! the fun I've had coon, 'possum and fox-hunting in the Coshocton valley. But, ah me! years take the tuck outen a feller and shortens his wind. Oh, if I were the man that Dick Wharton is!—a boy in years and yet a giant in stature and strength; and when you pin him down to it, he's a giant in intellect too, for the chances he's had—a diamond in the rough."

"That is exactly what I think of Dick, Kit," said Herbert Renfrew.

The party whiled away the time the best they could. Two hours had passed when Old Kit suddenly started to his feet and dashed toward the mouth of the cavern, exclaiming:

"Music!—the hounds! the hounds!"

CHAPTER XI.

AN ELK CHASE.

THERE was a general rush to the mouth of the cave, and, true enough, the baying of one-and-twenty hounds came up through the silent storm.

The sound came from the direction of the plain, and every moment it seemed to grow plainer; and in dire suspense Bandy and the settlers watched for the pack and the object of their pursuit.

They had not long to wait. Across the mouth of the canyon along the foot of the hills suddenly dashed that elk-sledge. The elk was fairly flying along in a swinging trot—the fastest gait of that stately animal—dragging the sledge with its silent occupant behind, while in close pursuit followed the bellowing hounds.

But in a moment almost both pursued and pursuers disappeared behind the ridge.

"By the horn of Joshua!" exclaimed Old Kit, "we'll soon know the secret of that sledge now. Them hounds 'll soon bring the elk to bay. Boys, s'pose some of us cut across the ridge and watch the course they take?"

"Ah, they have already turned up the valley on the other side of the ridge," responded Sheldon, "and may be right around into this very canyon."

The noise of the hounds indicated quite clearly the course the chase had taken, and as Mr. Sheldon had predicted, it was but a few minutes

till the elk, with the hounds at his heels, was seen coming down the canyon toward them.

As it neared the watchers a rifle below suddenly rung out, and the terrified animal sunk to its knees, and the next moment the hounds were at its throat.

Roving Ben coming across the hills had fired the shot.

In a few moments the settlers were by the side of the elk; but where was the sledge?

It was nowhere to be seen; the animal had broken loose from it in passing around the ridge.

A look of bitter disappointment clouded the face of Amos Sheldon and his friends, and Bloodhound Dick coming up, shared in their disappointment.

Headed by the Boy Hercules, Roving Ben, Kit Bandy, Acklin and Sheldon, started at once to follow the trail back in search of the sledge.

Passing around the upper end of the ridge, where the canyon forked, they turned down on the opposite side, and had gone but a short distance when they came in sight of the sledge.

Bloodhound Dick, who was now in the rear with his hounds, stopped to examine a track he had discovered in the snow. It was a moccasin-track and led across the valley. It had been made quite recently, else it would have been filled with snow, but before the elk and hounds had gone up that way. Dick felt satisfied it was an Indian's track.

While the Boy Hercules was making this examination the other four hurried on to the sledge. As they approached it, a cry burst from Bandy's lips. There were scores of human tracks around the sledge. Indians or outlaws, or both, had been there and rifled the vehicle of everything except that lifeless form, which, frozen stiff, still sat bolt upright, his bearded face covered with snow and ice.

Scarcely had this discovery been made, when a voice, speaking in an imperative tone, rung out:

"Surrender therer! every devil of you! drop them weapons, or die!"

Looking in the direction from whence the sound came, our friends beheld half-a-score of outlaws and Indians, who had sprung from concealment under a ledge of rock, standing with their rifles leveled full upon them! For a moment they were stricken dumb with this terrible surprise. They had walked into a deadly trap from which there seemed no possible escape. There was but one thing for them to do, and that was to surrender; and unbuckling their belts, they dropped their weapons at their feet.

But there was a greater surprise awaiting all parties. Bloodhound Dick was not visible to the outlaws when they made the demand for the surrender of his friends, but his acute ear caught the sound of the outlaw's ringing voice and he stopped short—for a moment at a loss to know what to do. As the point of rocks hid the foe, he did not know their number, and before he had time to act, he saw his friends drop their weapons and the outlaws and savages advance from their covert toward the sledge.

The instant the young hunter saw their force, he stooped, seized the old bloodhound Rove by the throat and shook him till he yelped. The sound reached the enemy's ears and they stopped short, stricken with utter amazement and terror.

"Surrender!" thundered the voice of Dick, as he raised his big revolvers, "or, by the gods, I'll let slip these dogs of war!"

And taking advantage of this diversion, the men at the sledge snatched up their weapons and leveled them upon the astonished outlaws.

"Surrender!" then burst from the lips of Kit Bandy, "or, by the horn of Joshua! we'll let drive our pups of destruction!"

The outlaws fairly staggered under this additional demand, for they found themselves between two fires, as it were. Full well they knew the ferocity of Bloodhound Dick's dogs, and they would rather have taken their chances at the muzzles of twenty revolvers than at the muzzles of those trained hounds. Their victory turned into such a sudden and terrible surprise seemed to set their brains in a whirl. Their real danger was magnified by fear two-fold. There was but one avenue of escape open to them, and that was to surrender. They did not wait long for a third summons for they saw the dog Rove with glaring eyes and glittering teeth, half-crouched, creeping slowly toward them. The leader threw down his rifle, and with apparent good grace said:

"It's no use, boys, for they've got the drop

on us, and we're the trapped instead of the trappers."

His comrades followed his example, and threw down their arms, though with evident reluctance.

"Well done, my jolly rovers!" exclaimed Old Kit Bandy.

Then two of the men advanced, and securing the discarded guns and pistols, removed them to the sledge.

Bloodhound Dick spoke to his dogs, and they quieted down, though Rove seemed sullen with disappointment.

The captors now advanced and confronted their villainous-looking captives. Roving Ben was the first to speak.

"You thought you'd play sharps on us, didn't ye?" he said.

"If it hadn't been for them cussed dogs, we'd 'a' had you gentlemen safe," replied the leader, an easy, indifferent sort of a fellow, whom Dick put down as a coward.

"What did you take from that sledge?" Mr. Sheldon demanded.

"Nothin' but a woman's shawl and some robes and blankets. The gal herself weren't there."

Sheldon drew a breath of relief, and yet when he reflected that Florence's fate was still a mystery, his anguish of heart seemed all the more bitter. From the outlaw's reply it seemed that he anticipated the object of his—Sheldon's—inquiry, who concluded that the villain must know something of his child's abduction.

"Do you know that dead man in that sledge?" asked Dick.

"Well, now look here, my little fellow," said the facetious outlaw, with a cool abandon verging on impudence, "there are ten of us fellers, and the fact of it is we've surrendered to five men and about twenty dogs, and we want to know what you are goin' to do with us afore we tell all we know."

"We'd ought to shoot every devil of you as you'd doubtless have served my friends if you'd come out on top," said Dick; "however, we don't want any unnecessary bloodshed, but we do want information."

"Well," said the outlaw, in a business sort of a way, "I'll tell you what we'll do."

"Hold up, sir! It's not for you to make terms," thundered Bloodhound Dick, in a tone that precluded further arrogance on the part of the outlaw. "But I'll tell you what we'll do—we will permit you to depart without your weapons on condition that you tell us all you know about that sledge and its dead occupant. But remember, we want the truth. We already know enough about that man and sledge to tell whether you are lying or not. All we want are some connectin' links."

"Well, I'll tell you frankly that that man's one of our ba—party—a friend. He was sent yesterday with the sledge to abduct Miss Florence Sheldon, of The Corners—carry her to The Good Samaritan Ranch, where she was to be wedded to Colonel Gleason."

"Who is Colonel Gleason?" asked Dick.

"Picton Warrindale," answered the outlaw.

"Ay, the lieutenant of that notorious outlaw, Doc Middleton!"

"Yes, sir," the villain went on, "but it seems that Philgrave there failed in the end in his work. I understood he captured the girl while she was on one of her daily visits to The Hermitage, but who it war killed him and what become of the gal I know not. Her shawl and a pair of skates are under the ledge there now. But when we heard that Agog, the elk, was wanderin' about over the prairie at will with a dead driver we set out to look it up, and it seems you fellers are here on the same business. We thought we held a full hand but you beat us with four aces and—them dogs. Now, then, this is as near the truth as I know how to tell it."

"You admit, then, that you're a part of Middleton's band?"

"Well, I—I admit," stammered the outlaw, "that we're not saints."

"We'd ought to shoot 'em!" declared Roving Ben.

"That's so, Ben! But, let the scoundrels go."

The outlaws looked at the boy giant in amazement, for it seemed impossible that they were to get off so easy. They acted as if they suspected treachery on the part of their captors and seemed loth to turn their backs upon them. But, finally, seeing there was no other course they turned and nervously moved away.

Securing the sledge, the robes and blankets under the ledge, the party returned to the cavern with their captured weapons. In a few words

Mr. Sheldon narrated their disappointment and adventures.

What was to be done now?

Bloodhound Dick suggested that they start at once for The Samaritan before the released outlaws could bring the whole Indian tribe, with whom they were in league, down upon them. Some of the more superstitious did not like the idea of going to the mysterious ranch; but Renfrew who was suffering with his limb insisted on Dick's proposition as being the only safe course for him, and so it was acceded to and preparation for departure at once made.

The harness was taken from the dead elk and out of this and strips of blanket and buffalo-robe a harness was improvised for Runkles's horse which was then hitched to the sledge. In this Mr. Renfrew was snugly and warmly tucked away among robes and blankets, and then the journey to The Good Samaritan Ranch was begun over twenty miles or more of snow-clad plain—under a stormy sky.

CHAPTER XII.

THE STORM WAIF AND GOOD SAMARITAN.

THE SCENE OF OUR STORY CHANGES.

We would take the reader back to the evening of the day upon which our story opened.

Thirty miles north of The Corners Arrow creek took its rise and flowing southward close by The Samaritan Ranch and down across the plain—forcing its way through hill and valley with the swiftness of the gliding arrow—finally poured its waters into the Cheyenne river a few miles below The Corners. It was rather a large stream for a creek and rather small to be termed a river. It had a broad, smooth surface which, for most of its entire length, lay scarcely two feet on an average, below the level of the valley through which it ran.

Alone over the icy bosom of this creek, on the evening in question, a form was swiftly gliding upon ringing skates. It was the form of a woman, too,—a lithe form in a long, seal-skin coat and a queer-looking bonnet somewhat after the style of that of a Quakeress. A dark vail concealed her face. Her hands were incased in fur mitts—she was well and warmly clad against the inclement weather. But who was she?

It seemed strange, indeed, that a woman would be there in the heart of that great prairie with night setting in and a wintry storm already driving across the plain and roaring through the heavens. But such was the case and with her head bent slightly to the storm this mysterious woman glided swiftly onward deeper and deeper into the heart of that great, desolate prairie. The storm and darkness together made it almost impossible to see a rod before her, but as the wind kept the ice clear of snow, she sped along with the ease and grace of one familiar with the way until her ears were suddenly greeted by a cry that seemed to issue from human lips.

Quick as she could the woman came to a stop and listened. Again that cry came faintly to her ears. It came from the shore down the stream. Retracing her footsteps a short ways she saw, through the night and storm, the outlines of a human figure standing upon the bank. Back of it she could hear the cry and snarling of a score of hungry wolves.

Ascending the bank the skater approached the unknown waif of the storm and in a clear, ringing voice called out:

"Who is there?"

"Oh, heavens! help me! help me!" was the answer that came from female lips.

The two approached nearer when the skater again asked:

"Are you in distress? are you lost in this storm?"

"Yes, and perishing with cold. Oh, help me!"

"Are you not Florence Sheldon?"

"I am," was the storm waif's answer.

"Then trust in me, fair girl. I am The Good Samaritan, and know that it is against your will you are here."

There was something in the veiled woman's tone that dispelled the gloom and fear from the girl's heart, and with the utmost confidence in her Florence Sheldon said:

"I was carried here a captive by a strange man whom I never saw before."

"And, pray, how did you escape from him?" asked The Good Samaritan.

"Oh, dear, I hardly know," replied the distressed and shivering maiden; "but my captor was in a sledge drawn by an elk, and when I saw that I was being carried away I fell in a swoon, and when I recovered, what was my horror and surprise to see my captor sitting in his seat dead—a bullet-hole in his forehead and blood frozen in icicles upon his beard. Again I

fell fainting and when I again recovered I found it was dark and storming. When I fully realized my situation I saw that I was being dragged here and there over the plain by that elk with my dead captor. The very thought of being alone with the dead sent a chill to my heart, and rising to my feet I leaped from that sledge. That was nearly an hour ago, and since then I have been wandering here and there with no idea in the world of where I am."

"Come with me, my poor child, and you shall soon be in a place of safety where the storm nor foes cannot reach you."

The Good Samaritan led her down the bank on to the ice, and taking her by the hand, conducted her slowly up the stream. They spoke but a few words, for the driving storm made conversation quite difficult.

In this way they had journeyed a mile or two when The Good Samaritan turned to the left where the bank rose up some twenty feet in height, and whose facade was covered with wild grape-vines and other parasites that hung like a great curtain to the water's edge. Reaching out the woman seized one of these vines and shook the clinging snow from it; then parting the vines she stepped through the opening under the bank and drew Florence in after her.

"We will soon be at our journey's end, Miss Sheldon," she said, as she took Florence by the hand and conducted her back into a narrow, subterranean passage—ascended a flight of three or four steps—groped on a few feet further and ascended a few more steps, then pushed open a door, and entered a dark room.

"Wait a moment and I will strike a light," remarked the good woman, and in a short space of time a light flooded the room.

Florence glanced around her. The room was quite small and was evidently nothing more than a hole dug in the hill. In other words it was a prairie "dugout." The walls were covered with hangings of some dark cloth. At one side was a small tin stove—an emigrant's stove—and in the corner near were cooking utensils and a provision chest. There were two or three chairs, a table and couple of pallets in the room. Some very pretty pictures were upon the walls.

It was quite warm in the place, but notwithstanding this fact The Good Samaritan proceeded to light a fire in the stove, and in a few minutes its heat was added to the natural warmth in the "dugout." Florence now removed her wraps as did her hostess, also, with the exception of her quaker bonnet and her vail.

Why it was that the good woman remained *incognito*, Florence could not imagine. There was a bit of a mystery about her and her home into which Florence forbore to inquire by word or act.

The Good Samaritan finally set about the preparation of supper, and in the course of an hour it was announced as ready. A cup of tea, some broiled venison and hot biscuit made up the repast, and never did viands taste so good to Florence Sheldon before.

After she had partaken of her supper the fair fugitive began to grow drowsy; she felt a kind of stupor coming over her—that which is invariably superinduced by a sudden change from a cold to a warm atmosphere. Her hostess prevailed upon her to lie down upon a couch, and in a few minutes she was wrapt in a deep, refreshing slumber.

No sooner did the veiled woman notice this than she lit a candle, and going to one side of the room, lifted the wall-curtain and disappeared behind it into a narrow passage at the opposite end of which was a flight of steps dug in the earth. These steps she ascended, landing in another passage between two sod walls. On her right was a door which she opened upon its noiseless hinges, and stepped out into a larger room. As she did so, a current of air put out her light, but she was glad of it, for, at the same instant, the sound of voices fell upon her ears.

Leaving the door ajar, she advanced on tiptoe to where she could see down through two open doors into a third room, where she saw a light, and the forms of a number of men.

For several moments she stood, and watched, and listened as though every nerve was strained to its utmost tension; but at length she saw two men with a light enter the middle room, when she quickly sprung back and entering the secret passage closed the door behind her. This door was an ingenious contrivance—a stout frame built up with a layer of sod like the wall, the framework being so concealed as to give all the appearance of a solid wall.

Groping her way back down the narrow steps, The Good Samaritan returned to her subterranean room where Florence was still asleep.

Seating herself in a rude arm-chair she leaned her head against the back, and gave way to mental reflection; and in this position she fell asleep and slept for hours. Finally she awoke with a start, and rising to her feet crept softly from the room, back to that chamber above.

When she returned ten minutes later she seemed nervous and excited. She took what appeared to be a picture from a receptacle in the wall, and for the third time returned to those rooms above. She was gone half an hour and when she came back the whiteness of her face might have been seen through her veil. Her hands trembled and her form shook with violent emotion. She sat down, and resting her head on her hand, sunk into a deep reflection. She sat there for fully an hour.

Suddenly she was startled by the dull, subdued report of a firearm.

Florence Sheldon started from her sleep with a little cry. The sound of the weapon had awakened her.

"Oh, my dear friend!" she cried out in alarm, "did you hear that pistol-shot?"

"Yes, yes, Florence," answered the veiled woman, stretching out her white, trembling hand, "but do not be frightened."

"Oh, heavens! just listen! what a terrible sound—as if of a dreadful battle! From whence does it come?"

"It seems to come from above us," replied the woman.

And, true enough, it did. Although walls of earth were between them and the combatants, the din of conflict came to their ears—faint and subdued, yet with all the horrors of a death-struggle. But the sound of the contest lasted only for a few moments. It put Florence to thinking. Her mind was clearer now and her thoughts were more collected. Her captivity, the horrors of her ride with the dead man, her escape from the sledge, the howling wolves and her rescue by The Good Samaritan—all passed in rapid review before her mind. But where could she be? and who was her rescuer? She had never heard of such a person or such a place; she could not imagine where she had drifted to. She saw that her hostess was somewhat excited, and knew it was the result of those dreadful sounds they had heard, for she paced the floor of the dugout in evident impatience and uneasiness—ever and anon stopping to listen. But all was silent now as the grave, and a painful doubt seemed to rise in the mind of the veiled woman—a doubt as to the result of the conflict. But why should it? Had she friends in the conflict?

"Florence," the woman finally said, "I am going out; I hope you will excuse me for a moment."

"Oh, certainly," replied Florence, as the woman disappeared behind the curtain concealing the entrance to the secret stairs.

In a few moments she returned and said:

"Miss Sheldon, come with me; I have something to show you."

She spoke in a tone entirely different to that in which she had hitherto addressed her guest.

Florence rose and followed her out into the narrow stairway—up the steps into the narrow hall and through the door into that room into which we have followed her once before.

"Why, we are in a house!" exclaimed the astonished maiden, as she gazed around her.

"Yes; but follow me," ordered her hostess.

Florence followed her into a second room that was well furnished for a sod cabin—a frontier home. From this they went into a third room, in which there was a stove with fire still in it. But not another living creature besides themselves was about, and yet the warm atmosphere and the fire in the stove were evidence of the room having been recently occupied.

As they turned and walked back into the second room, The Good Samaritan asked:

"Florence, do you know now where you are?"

"I do not," declared the maiden in bewilderment.

"You are in The Good Samaritan Ranch," replied the veiled woman.

"What? in The Good Samaritan Ranch?" cried Florence, starting back with a shudder of horror; "then you are—"

"Marion Renfrew!" interrupted The Good Samaritan, throwing back her veil and revealing the fair face of that daring, eccentric girl to the gaze of the astonished Florence Sheldon.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE SECRET OF THE SAMARITAN—INTRUDERS.

FLORENCE SHELDON stood spell-bound and speechless. She could scarcely believe the evi-

dence of her own eyes—that her friend, Marion Renfrew, stood before her—The Good Samaritan—the hostess of The Samaritan Ranch!

A peal of rippling laughter from the lips of her friend broke the spell that bound her.

"Marion Renfrew!" she exclaimed, "is this possible?"

"It is, Flo.," she replied, removing her bonnet; "come and sit down here, child, for you are excited."

"Who wouldn't be, Marion, after passing through what I have during the past twenty-four hours?" replied Florence as she sat down by her friend; "and to think, Marion, that you would keep your identity from me so long."

"I really did it for your own good, Flo., though I may have been wrong in doing so."

"But, Marion, what in the world brought you here on such a night as this?"

"It was not storming when I left the Hermitage for this place, but in my coming I see the work of Providence. Had I not ventured out, you, Flo., would have perished in the storm."

"Then you knew of my abduction when you left home?"

"Yes, more than two hours before I left. Grayson's little boys, who were rabbit hunting, saw you carried off and ran home and gave the alarm. In a short time your father and three settlers came to our cabin to inquire about you, and finding the boy's story was a true one, my father joined your and his friends in the pursuit of the sledge in which you were carried away. After they were gone I got to thinking about you and the dreadful fate that awaited you, and I couldn't remain still. I wanted to do something, and some mysterious voice whispered to me that I could be of service to you, and so I made known my intentions to our colored servants, dressed myself and putting on my skates set out for this point. I tell you, Flo., I had a presentiment that my assistance was needed, and who dares to say that that presentiment has not come true?"

"But how does it come, Marion, that you are so familiar with the secret passages of The Good Samaritan Ranch—passages and apartments that I never heard of before?"

Marion again burst into a peal of laughter.

"Oh, Florence," she said, "I presume I will have to tell you the secret of this place which has puzzled people so long. Would you believe me if I should tell you that I am the spirit behind the throne in The Good Samaritan Ranch—in other words the proprietress of the place?"

"I am prepared to believe anything you may tell me, for I see you are a wonderful girl, Marion," replied Florence.

"Well, it is a fact that I have managed the affairs of this ranch. You know I always told you I loved mystery, and one day, when father and I first came to this country, we called at this cabin and found it occupied by three homesteaders who were wanting to sell out their claims and go into the gold-diggings. They were afraid to stay here on account of the Indians, and to prevent capture in case of a sudden attack they dug that secret room under the ground from which we just came. They showed father and I through the whole building and secret passages, and it struck me as being a wonderful nice arrangement, and the idea of The Good Samaritan Ranch was suggested to my mind and I prevailed on father to buy them out. The poor fellows started to the gold regions but were all massacred by the cruel Indians."

"Well, father was always ready to indulge me in my wild schemes, and furnished me the means to keep up the ranch as it has been kept for over a year. Whenever our supplies run short, I send our negro servant, who is in the secret and a true and trusty fellow, to the Agency with an order for goods accompanied with the cash. Father and I have spent more than one night here in that secret chamber when Doc Middleton and his men were guests in these rooms, and when bloodthirsty savages in war-paint smoked their pipes here and recounted their deeds of blood. From a hole in that double wall I watched them for hours, and that is how I got so many such subjects for my brush and pencil. Singular as it may seem, nothing was ever carried away. Outlaw and savage respected the confidence reposed in them, and many a good laugh have I had all to myself when I heard the settlers and knowing ones talking about the spirits of St. Bernard monks and all such. Oh, it has really been delightful, Flo.; I never enjoyed anything so much in all my life."

"Well, really, Marion," observed Florence, "you are a mystery yourself. I am astounded, I must confess. But, Marion, what do you

know of those sounds we heard a few minutes ago?"

"I am afraid there was a desperate conflict here."

"Between whom?"

"Flo., your lover, Frank Morton, was here when we came!"

"What?" Florence cried, with quivering lips. "Frank Morton here? Where is he now? Was he in trouble, Marion?"

"He and Bloodhound Dick were both here," continued Marion, "as were also several other men, who I believe were outlaws, and with whom I am afraid Frank and Dick became involved in trouble."

"Oh, heavens! then Frank has been slain!" cried Florence, wringing her hands in distress.

"I do not know how the conflict ended, Flo., but I feel satisfied that Dick and Frank held their own. Dick had a lot of ferocious bloodhounds with him. I found many traces of the conflict in the other room, but nothing to judge of the result but this signature of Dick Wharton on the register. The ink was scarcely dry when I looked at it, and as the name has been written with a nervous hand, I think it must have been done after the conflict. Had Frank been slain, Dick would, surely, not have left here with his body. I feel hopeful, from these facts, that they are safe."

"Oh, I pray to Heaven that they are!" cried Florence.

"I am sorry now that I did not make our presence known. I could, at one time have spoken with Dick and Frank had I not been afraid of the others. I have a large portrait of yourself, that I intended to present to you on your wedding-day, and with this I played a practical joke on those boys. I carried the picture before me where the light and darkness of the room met, and they saw it, but before they could make any investigation, I disappeared through that secret door leading into the secret room below. I expect I was cruel in doing so, but had I ever dreamed of bloodshed and violence I would not have done so. I supposed all would go quietly along as heretofore, and that all would remain until morning at least. So now, Flo., you know the secret of The Samaritan Ranch, and you are the only one outside of my family; and so you see it isn't much of a mystery after all."

"Not to me now, but to the outside world it is a profound mystery. My only wonder now is that I never mistrusted you before. What a deal of courage and caution you must possess. But, poor father! how troubled he will be, and what a dreadful time will they have in the cold and storm. And there is no telling where they may go, and into what danger they may fall."

"Let us trust in Heaven, Flo., for the best. So far the Lord has been with us. Then you have no idea by whose hand your captor was slain?"

"No; when I awoke or recovered from my swoon he was sitting there dead—shot through the head. He could not have done it himself, and I presume some hunter or trapper must have done it, and the report of the gun frightened the elk and it dashed away. Oh, Marion! my wedding day promises to be a day of horror—of sadness and sorrow!"

"Hark!" exclaimed Marion, "some one has entered the cabin! It may be friends—Frank and Dick, and it may be—"

She did not finish the sentence for the sound of voices fell upon her ears.

Florence started to her feet, a look of doubt and fear upon her face.

Marion Renfrew drew the light across the table toward her.

The next instant the form of a man appeared in the doorway covered with snow. He was a stranger to the girls, and the look upon his face sent a shudder to their hearts.

It was "Colonel Gleason"—the outlaw lieutenant, Picton Warrindale!

CHAPTER XIV.

WOMAN'S SHREWDNESS vs. MAN'S CUNNING.

To both Marion and Florence Colonel Gleason was unknown; but the look on the man's face and the presence of his four friends, two of whom were savages, filled the hearts of the maidens with fear. Florence's emotions were manifested in her looks, but Marion, with remarkable presence of mind, assumed a look that betrayed no more emotion than if she had been seated in The Hermitage. Rising, she bowed politely to the colonel, saying:

"Good-evening, sir."

"Good-evening, ladies," replied the man, removing his hat and stepping into the room; "I

believe I have the honor of addressing Miss Sheldon and Miss Renfrew, have I not?"

"Yes, sir," replied Marion, "but I do not know that I ever met you before."

"My name is Gleason, Colonel Cyrus Gleason."

The maidens reflected. They did not remember of having ever heard the name before."

Gleason's friends and the two Indians remained in the first room.

The colonel drew a chair up to the table and sat down upon the side opposite the girls.

"This is rather a stormy night, Mr. Gleason, for one to be abroad."

"It is indeed, Miss Renfrew," replied the man; "you ladies must have arrived quite recently."

"Then," said the quick-witted girl, "you have been here before."

"Oh, yes! I stopped here once with my troops over-night."

"But I mean to-night," Marion persisted.

"What makes you think so?"

"The remark you made."

"Well, I must confess that I have been here before to-night."

"And were you in that conflict that was here to-night?"

"Pray, tell me how you know there was a conflict here to-night?"

"I see the evidence of it in the adjoining room," replied Marion.

"I had a hand in it," replied the colonel, evidently losing his serenity under Marion's close questioning.

"And how did it end? Did both sides get whipped and run off into the storm?"

"Miss Renfrew, you are inclined to be severely sarcastic," replied the colonel, a little petulantly.

"Oh, you must not take offense at anything I may say, Mr. Gleason; but I would like to know something about that battle."

Gleason looked puzzled as well as provoked.

Marion was judge enough of human nature to know that the man was a villain, and his presence there with his friends made her sorely uneasy about Hercules Dick and Frank Morton. She also felt that she and Florence were in imminent peril and she made up her mind at once as to the course she should pursue in case she was right in her suspicions.

"Well," the man finally said, "I came out of the battle unscratched."

"What became of Frank Morton and Bloodhound Dick, Mr. Gleason? were they injured? or did they run, too?"

"D-n it, girl!" exclaimed the man, flying into a passion, "you know all about that battle, and its results, and Bloodhound Dick and Frank Morton will never dare cross my path again!"

This outburst settled one thing in the minds of the girls—the fact, that Dick and Frank were alive, but it brought Gaule and his companions to the door to see what was wrong. Gleason waved them back, then fixed his glowering, sensual eyes upon the girls and awaited Marion's cool, calm reply.

"Oh, you are sensitive, colonel," she said; "the stormy weather and ill-fortune, perchance, have disheartened you."

"No," he said in a slow, measured tone, "I am not disheartened—I came here to meet Miss Sheldon and I have not been disappointed."

"To meet me?" cried Florence.

"To meet you."

"How did you know I would be here?" the maiden questioned.

"You were to have been brought here by my friend Philgrave in the elk-sledge. But I am told Philgrave is dead—was killed sitting in his vehicle; but be he dead or alive, he has kept his word—his promise to bring you here to-night."

"Why have I been brought here?—carried away from my friends by violence?"

"To wed me, Miss Sheldon," replied the villain with a devilish smile upon his face.

Florence uttered a little cry and turned deadly pale. Marion's face flashed with indignation, and with a haughty, scornful voice, exclaimed:

"Then you are a villain, Colonel Gleason!"

"I admire your pluck, Miss Renfrew—in fact, I am now undecided as to which I shall choose—the modest violet or the saucy pink. I have long known Miss Sheldon and loved her with all the passion of a warrior's heart, and I had made arrangements that we meet here to-night and get married. I brought a priest for that purpose."

"Don't you know, colonel, old as you are, it takes two to make a bargain of that kind?" asked the fearless Marion.

"Ordinarily it does, but this is an exceptional case. Love does not always signify marriage,

nor marriage love. I knew Miss Sheldon was a romantic young lady that would enjoy such a romantic marriage."

"But Miss Sheldon was to have been married to-morrow to Mr. Frank Morton," said Marion, "and was—"

"So I learned, hence my haste," put in the villain, endeavoring to break down the defiant, resolute spirit of the brave Marion, "but since I have met you and seen what a fiery, untamed spirit you possess, my heart yearns for you."

"Be careful it don't bleed, colonel," replied the fearless girl—unmoved and undaunted; "for I am not afraid of you!"

"Oh! perhaps you have friends about; but I will see. Father Gaule?"

The villain addressed appeared in the doorway.

"Search this ranch from end to end—see that no one is about to forbid the banns," commanded the colonel.

Gaule and the two Indians began to search, but found no one.

A faint, triumphant smile rested upon the face of the fair Marion.

Gaule and his sleuth-hounds again retired to the kitchen.

Gleason went on with his unnatural wooing. Finally he said:

"Well, this play on words has gone on long enough. The night is well spent. I came here for a wife, and a wife I must have."

"Colonel, beware!" exclaimed Marion, taking a little derringer from her pocket and laying it upon the table and resting her hand upon it, "beware, I say, lest you claim Death as your bride!"

The colonel smiled, though it was the smile of a craven heart.

"Your acting is superb, Miss Renfrew, I must confess; and I see that I must invite my friends in."

As he spoke, he rose and walked to the door. Marion glanced quickly at Florence and grasping her hand, sprung to her feet and blew out the light, wrapping the room in darkness.

An oath burst from Gleason's lips as he turned and lunged through the gloom toward the girls. But they were gone!

"Bring a light! watch the door!" thundered the baffled villain.

The candle was relit, but the birds had flown.

From room to room the outlaw and his men darted like hounds that had lost the trail. But nowhere inside The Samaritan Ranch could the girls be found, nor could they find, by the closest search, the avenue of their escape.

Gleason was white with rage. The Indians darted out into the night and storm and beat around and about the ranch, finally returning with no tidings of the girls.

"Colonel," said Gaule, "are you sure they were in the flesh?—that you were not wooing spirits of The Samaritan Ranch?"

"Spirits, the devil!" retorted the outlaw lieutenant, "did you ever hear of spirits sling derringers around and blowing out lights? No! they were two living girls, and I will stay here till the grass grows but what I'll have them!"

By the time they had given up the search it was daylight. Breakfast was prepared and eaten, and after all had enjoyed a pipe at the expense of the ranch, a man was placed upon guard and the others lay down to get a few hours' sleep and rest.

And thus quiet came once again to The Good Samaritan Ranch.

The day wore slowly away, and toward its close the Indian on guard discovered a party of men approaching from the west.

"By heavens!" exclaimed Gleason after he had scanned the party closely, "it is that infernal Bloodhound Dick and a party of his friends! You see a swarm of dogs at their heels, also a horse and sledge. Boys, we're in for a fight, but we hold the fort. Barricade the door and look to your guns and pistols and if they attempt to storm the castle we'll give them a warm reception. We can hold them at bay without trouble, and the cold will soon force them to retire. Some one apprise them of our presence with a rifle-shot—pick off that big hellion, Bloodhound Dick."

The party was now within three hundred yards of the ranch, but the distance did not seem half so far. An Indian opened the wicket in the door and thrusting the muzzle of his gun out fired upon the party, but with no other result than to apprise the party of the presence of foes in The Samaritan.

Gleason took his position at the little window where he could watch the movements of the party, and while thus engaged a bullet from

Roving Ben's rifle struck in the dry sod at the side of the window and covered the face and filled the eyes and mouth of the unlucky "colonel" with dirt—calling forth a string of oaths and dire threats of vengeance.

The party on the prairie stopped and after a few minutes, deliberation they turned to the right and bore south of the ranch. In course of half an hour they disappeared behind a swell in the prairie down the creek.

Gleason and his friends breathed easier, for they felt satisfied that the party had moved on. The stormy weather would not permit of a siege.

A scout was sent out to watch the movements of the party, and he barely escaped death at the jaws of Bloodhound Dick's dogs that pursued him almost to the door of The Samaritan.

The scout brought the news that the party had encamped on the ice of Arrow creek half a mile below between the bluffs of the stream.

"They're going to make a night attack," said Gleason, "and so we have got to be ready for a desperate conflict. If that pack of dogs get inside of this house we're goners."

As the shadows of night gathered the outlaws made every preparation for their defense. The door was securely barricaded, and every weapon loaded and primed.

Darkness set in with a storm raging.

An Indian stood with his ear at the half-closed wicket listening for the approach of the foe.

A candle burned on the table in the second room where Gleason and his friends sat waiting for the worst.

Suddenly they were startled by a movement in the third room, or sleeping apartment.

Gleason sprung to his feet and taking the light walked to the door.

He started back with a cry of terror, for through an open door—that secret door in the end of the building—he saw Bloodhound Dick appear, followed by eight or ten men and a score of dogs.

CHAPTER XV.

A BLOODLESS VICTORY—"THE MAN WANTED"—LOVERS' STRATAGEM.

COLONEL GLEASON stood like one stupefied—like a stone image representing surprise and terror. In one hand he held aloft the flickering candle—in the other he held his revolver at his side. Bloodhound Dick was the first to speak.

"Thus we meet again, colonel," he said sarcastically.

A sickly smile played about the villain's lips.

"Horn of Old Joshua!" burst from the lips of Old Kit Bandy; "that's Homer Dilke, the gentleman who as postmaster of D—defrauded the Government out of a few thousand and escaped, and for years has eluded we detectives. I'll admit I'm out here lookin' for counterfeiters, but I'll take you in, Homer, for you're the man I want now. Drap that barker and consider yourself under arrest."

Gleason turned deadly pale. He saw that he was in a trap from whence there was no escape. True, he thought of escape—of blowing out the light and attempting to get away in the darkness, but the presence of those bear-eyed dogs told him that such a course would result in a horrible death. Turning to his friends he threw his revolver upon the ground and said:

"It's no use, boys, we're trapped."

The villain and his crowd surrendered, and were disarmed.

Victors, prisoners and dogs were all assembled in the second room when who should enter, arm in arm, but Marion Renfrew and Florence Sheldon. A smile of joy and happiness rested upon their faces, and when Gleason saw them, it seemed the outwitted, defeated and humiliated scoundrel would sink down in his tracks.

The maidens had, of course, met their friends in the secret underground apartment, whither Mr. Renfrew had conducted the party, and heard from them the story of the dangers through which they had passed, and the state of affairs in The Samaritan at that time.

The three outlaws were securely bound and then the party sat down to rest and talk over the events of the past two days and nights. Mr. Renfrew, who had been left in the secret chamber, was assisted above, and being seated in an easy position he entertained his friends with the full history of The Samaritan Ranch, and its secret.

"So after all," said Mr. Sheldon when the mystery had been cleared away, "the whole matter may be summed up as a fond father's indulgence and a fearless, romantic daughter's love of adventure and mystery; for all of which I thank God."

Thus ended the mystery of The Samaritan Ranch.

Marion and Florence prepared a sumptuous meal for the party, and when the hunger of all had been appeased, spirits that had been hitherto despondent began to revive, and soon the old ranch was vocal with joy and laughter, story and jest. Old Kit Bandy gave free range to his spirits, and jolly Roving Ben, the Boy Hunter, joined in with him, and together the two kept the party in the happiest humor.

Sleep came to few eyes that night, and early the following morning Runkles was dispatched on horseback to The Corners with the news of the safety of all and for teams to carry the party home.

During the day Bloodhound Dick held a long private interview with Herbert Renfrew in the secret room, or dugout, to which Marion was finally admitted. There were some words and severe threats fell from Renfrew's lips, followed by outbursts of laughter and words of reconciliation; and when the interview ended Dick Wharton and Marion were the happiest-looking couple, so Old Kit declared, that he had ever seen.

Florence Sheldon, also, observed that her friend, Marion, seemed unusually happy, and when they were alone, she asked:

"Marion, why do you feel so extremely happy to-day?"

"Why, I am always happy, Flo.—happy to know we are all safe."

"But there is something else besides our safety that—"

Marion burst into a peal of laughter.

"Well, I will tell you, Flo," she said; "father has consented that I may marry Dick Wharton."

"Great goodness!" exclaimed Florence; "you marry Dick Wharton?"

"Why, yes; isn't he good enough for me?"

"Yes, he is good enough, and noble enough for any woman, but I thought you loved another—Thomas Paige. Don't you remember you told me so just a day or two since?"

"Yes, and the joke of it is, Dick Wharton is Thomas Paige."

"Oh, you little sinner!" exclaimed Florence, "have you and your lover been deceiving your father that way?"

Marion again broke into a peal of merry laughter.

"It's all right with father, now," she said, "although he fairly swore when we told him the truth; but Dick Wharton has proven himself such a noble, brave and daring fellow, that father no longer has objections to Tom Paige, the freighter. In fact, father expresses himself as glad that we did deceive him in our love matters, and admits he wronged us both."

"Well, indeed, Miss Marion, you are a romantic soul; and I should like to know what the next surprise is that you have in store for me, although I am prepared for 'most anything now."

In due course of time the party returned to The Corners without further troubles.

Old Kit in charge of Homer Dilke, accompanied them, as did Dick and Roving Ben also.

Frank Morton and Florence were finally married and settled down into a quiet and happy life at The Corners.

Hercules Dick gave up his calling as a frontiersman and returning to his old home entered school, and in the course of time became all that the most refined woman could desire, so that there was no barrier between him and his betrothed.

To-day Thomas Paige is a successful and highly-respected business-man in a large western city, and in the large, bearded, cultured gentleman, few, indeed, would recognize the Boy Hercules who but seven or eight years ago, was the terror of the Indians and outlaws of western Dakota.

Roving Ben, grown to manhood, is still somewhere on the plains, and is now a famous scout.

For want of mystery and support, The Good Samaritan Ranch went into decay and became the abode of bats and owls, though it is still a landmark on the great plains of Dakota.

THE END.

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